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WAS SHE HIS WIFE?

By MRS. MARY REED CROWELL,
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"THE MASKED BRIDE," "HIS IDOL," ETC.



"BEWARE, GERVAISE DE LAURIAN, HOW YOU ACCUSE ME OF FALSEHOODS! REMEMBER WHO I AM!"

Was She His Wife?

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL.

CHAPTER I.

THE CURSE.

HALF-WAY between New York and the busy, pretty city of Paterson, New Jersey, stands a house, at once conspicuous to travelers on the Erie railroad, for its beauty as well as isolation of situation, no less than its elegance of design and finish, and the peculiarly romantic appearance it bears.

From the line of the railroad, and perhaps ten feet below that level, from which rude wooden steps lead down, stretches an immense park, traversed by curving drives, tree-shaded promenades, and open, sunny lawns.

A lake, of circular form and rather diminutive size, adorns the center of the park, from which narrow walks diverge toward the railroad—the carriage entrance—where a large iron gate stands hospitably open, and a tiny porter's lodge adds to the style of the grounds; and the dwelling itself—Chetwynd Chase.

At the first glance bestowed upon the fair gray granite pillars and towers of far-famed Chetwynd Chase, even the most superficial observer is impressed with the mingled beauty and weirdness, fairy grace, and somber aspect of its external appearance.

Standing upon a slight eminence, with a dense grove for a background, its tall turrets rearing above the highest tree-tops with the sloping grass-grown banks of the Passaic river stretching from the high flight of griffin-guarded steps down to the very brink of the river, that at that spot widens and curves into unusual beauty, Chetwynd Chase is exceedingly fair to look upon, even while among its own admirers it has won the name of the "Mysterious."

And there was a mystery, a deep and unfathomable mystery, that for more than two centuries defied investigation, that in later days—our own times—deepened from a mystery to a fearful curse; an anathema on one of the house of Chetwynd that was well calculated to cast dismal gloom on the unfortunate family.

But the Chetwynds of Chetwynd Chase, who had come to Old England, with William the Conqueror, and lived in almost royalty in their old baronial castle in Gloucestershire, and whose younger son, Rexton Chetwynd, had come to America twenty years before the present time—for our story is one of to-day, in a year we have lately seen (1865)—had ever borne with them, wherever they lived, the same strange mystery, that ever invested their homes with its sepulchral glare.

Rexton Chetwynd, who had taken for his home this grand old place, and christened it in true old English style, was one of those fine, courtly gentlemen who are fitted by birth, education and inclination, to fill the highest positions of honor and trust. He was remarkably handsome—but the Chetwynds were a splendid race—peerless beauty being one of the clauses sworn to in that old, old curse; of about the average height, possibly a trifle above, with erect, kingly bearing, bright, intense eyes of jettiest black, over which hung great, bushy eyebrows of purest white, that matched for hue and massiveness his hair and military beard.

Such was Rexton Chetwynd in his fifty-seventh year. The family at Chetwynd Chase was not large, exclusive of the corps of servants.

Mrs. Chetwynd, a queenly, quiet, elderly lady, who had been pretty in her fresher days, and now was just as charming in manner and temperament as ever she had been; a true wife, who believed her husband the most perfect man on all the earth, whose will was her rigid law, whose faintest expressed desire was her greatest pleasure to perform. She never presumed to contradict him in the slightest matter; such a wild idea had never entered her head; and, yielding her graceful, tender, dignified homage, she freely personated what we seldom see—a true, model wife; and perhaps more women would gladly follow her example, were the husbands to imitate Rexton Chetwynd in his chivalrous devotion and affectionate solicitude for her welfare and happiness.

There was a nephew traveling on the continent now, a handsome, high-spirited, gentlemanly man, with the Chetwynds' bold beauty and *hauteur*, and winning tenderness of mien.

Rex Chetwynd was deeply attached to his uncle and aunt, but on his only cousin, the darling of Chetwynd Chase, his heart was set with strongest affection.

Blanche Chetwynd was a girl whom to see

was to instantly admire; to know, to steadily love. Her charms of mind were no less than her graces of person, that were made up of a rare and beautiful commingling of style.

In stature she was less tall than most girls at her age—she was nineteen. Her eyes, jetty black like her father's, had in them a soft, pleading expression, that lessened greatly her likeness to Mr. Chetwynd. Her hair was like her mother's had been, bright, burnished gold in color, with not a ripple to mar the shining glory, save at the ends, which curled in loose, thick rings.

Her complexion was pale as marble, without the faintest vestige of color on her cheeks, and yet there was not a suggestion of pallid sickness in that sunny whiteness.

Her lips were proudly arched and of vivid scarlet, ripe and dewy, suggesting all manner of pretty similes—strawberries, gleaming ivy-berries, cleft pomegranates.

Blanche Chetwynd it was, this regal, peerless girl, on whom the curse would descend; to whom the mystery would be unraveled, which for two hundred years had been wrapt in densest gloom, and had been declared never to be explained until the youngest son of the house of Chetwynd could possess, in their youngest born, a daughter.

Heretofore, the youngest child had invariably been a son; and until Rexton Chetwynd had seen his fair Blanche grow up, year after year, and no other children following, he had not dreamed that on him and his the curse would fall.

But Blanche was nineteen now, and Mr. Chetwynd had long since given up hoping for another son, whose birth would thus avert the cloud from Blanche's head; and for years back he had been steeling himself for the blow he knew must come, sooner or later; but of its import, or coming, he was perfectly ignorant. He only knew, as Blanche herself knew, and all the Chetwynds, that, because from a youngest daughter the blight had proceeded, so to a youngest daughter it must return.

Rexton Chetwynd knew there was something awful about it; he had heard his grandfather tell about the "Scarlet Room" in the old baronial castle, where walls were encrimsoned with the blood of young Lady Constanza, whose pitiful story, whose tragic end, was well known to the family. He had heard of her ghost wandering through the halls, and of a dark, malignantly beautiful face that followed the figure—that of Reginald Lenox, the seducer, the murderer of young Constanza.

It had been handed down, this weird legend, from father to son, with the accompanying curse on the youngest daughter, who alone by a peculiar sacrifice could wipe out the stain of the Chetwynd horror.

And so Blanche, fair, beautiful Blanche, hundreds of miles from that old castle, in a land where legends and superstition go for what they are worth, was going on and on, to fight it out for Lady Constanza's sake.

CHAPTER II.

BARBARA'S LOVE.

IN one of the most luxuriously-appointed apartments of Chetwynd Chase, whose high, wide windows commanded far-reaching views over hills and meadows, a young girl was sitting, her fair, round arms folded on the window-ledge, her wondrously-splendid face set sternly toward the sunset sky, whose vivid hues were reflected in deliciously faint tints on her brunette complexion.

No one could have caught even the slightest glimpse of Barbara Lester's rare, strangely-beautiful face, without involuntarily uttering an exclamation of surprise and admiration.

It was a face that suggested the thought of a sudden, piercing rift of light over a thunder-charged storm-cloud, or a bright, dead-cold moonbeam shining down over a yawning, black fissure. A magnificent face, that exactly depicted the triumph of pride over despair; that denoted a will strong enough to move mountains, were they in her way.

The eyes were slumbrous, and generally veiled by the long thick lashes—eyes that looked as Barbara Lester willed they should look, that even Rexton Chetwynd, Sr., found a match for his own sun-bright ones.

Her mouth was perfect; not very small, but arched like a Cupid's bow; full of witching tenderness and womanliness, whether the red lips were parted in a dazzling, pearl-displaying smile, or gravely closed in demure silence.

This afternoon—a chill, sunny afternoon in late October—Barbara Lester had excused her-

self from the music-room, where Blanche Chetwynd was practicing; she had been in a state of unrest all the day, and now, as she locked her door, and almost flung herself into a chair by the open window, a sigh of relief came from her lips, a light to her eyes that was not all gladness, and a curl to her lips that was all contempt.

"How thoroughly sick of it all I am!" she said, as she leaned her head on her hand—so that the long brown tresses covered neck and arms.

"Thoroughly tired of it all, because it is *charity*, from my kingly Mr. Chetwynd down to baby Blanche—ah! baby though she is, she may yet thwart me! but if she does!"

Then a sudden, delightful memory seemed to return to her.

"How ridiculous I am! as if, *now*, she, or mortal woman, has it in her power to win him from me! Let them boast their kindness to poor Barbara Lester, the child who was left at their door, seventeen years ago; let them, I say, and I'd tell them to their faces that Barbara Lester's beauty will balance their money, any day!"

A gleam of gratified triumph lighted her eyes as she glanced backward into the pier glass.

"If Blanche is pretty, I am handsome; if she is beautiful, I am more so. And to think she should dream, for a moment, that her childish airs and graces could win Gervaise De Laurian from me!"

The name of her lover came in dulcet strains from her lips; came in a low, sweet key that sent the warm blood to her forehead, and a gladness light to her eyes.

"Gervaise, dearest one! truly Destiny has been good to me in leading you to me."

Her musing, dreamy voice died away in a meditative murmur as she bowed her regal head still lower on her hand, gazing earnestly at a picture painted on porcelain that hung, by a silver hook, beside the window.

She removed it, and looked more closely at it. It was a face, a head, that would have made any woman's heart beat the quicker at the thought of being beloved by the original.

Boldly handsome, intelligent, refined, with a dash of imperiousness, pride and willfulness in the finely-cut features. A blonde complexion shadowed by a heavy amber mustache; a pair of keen, almost fierce violet eyes; dark gold hair, tawny in hue, rare in its beauty, that was brushed low over the forehead, and off the temples, in a style that plainly told the carelessness of the wearer to its arrangement, as well as a proud consciousness of its extreme becomingness. Such was the face, so fascinating in its half-smiling, half-frowning pride, upon which Barbara Lester lavished such hot, ceaseless kisses.

Then she replaced the picture on its silver hook, but not before removing from its frame a heavy, plain gold ring, that she placed on her tiny finger.

"Blanche has never seen that, and little dreams she I am his betrothed bride. If she did, I think she would take better care that she did not flush and tremble so if he but chanced to touch her hand."

She had thrown a black lace shawl over her shoulders while she spoke, and then adjusted a tiny hat, on whose side glowed a spray of velvet pinks.

"I think I will do. Gervaise requested me to wear this suit, although it is a strange color for to-day."

She glanced down at her emerald green suit. "It means 'forsaken,' is it an omen, I wonder!"

Then, smiling at her nervous suggestion, she looked at her watch.

"Five o'clock so soon! and I promised to be at the chapel ruins at five."

With a hurried glance at the window, she swept across the velvet carpet, opened the door, then locked it after her.

Blanche Chetwynd met her at the gate, her sunbright curls all windblown about her fresh, fair face, her black eyes full of unspoken happiness.

"Off for a ramble, Barbara?"

Barbara laughed as she hoisted her parasol.

"To Passaic, I think, if the road is not too dusty. I may be late to dinner, but you'll make my excuses?"

"Assuredly. But there is the carriage, Barbara."

"Thanks; but a walk will be a delightful rarity."

"I think you'll meet Mr. De Laurian, Barbara, for I passed him at the chapel ruins a few minutes ago."

Barbara glanced keenly at the sweet, conscious face, and then a little look of stern reproof came to her lips.

"Mr. De Laurian and you often meet, Blanche."

Her words were intended as a probe to the young girl's heart, and Barbara exultingly saw the glow deepen on her cheeks.

"You are an adept, Blanche," and Barbara laid her finger on the girl's hot face.

"But, *adieu, mia cara*," and, wafting a kiss, she went on, and Blanche returned slowly to the Chaise.

It was not a long walk, and in a few minutes Barbara reached the ruins.

True to his tryst, Gervaise De Laurian awaited her. With a glad smile, in which all her beauty seemed to concentrate itself, she extended her hands.

"Gervaise! I was fearful I had kept you waiting too long!"

"As if forever were too long to wait for you, Barbara!"

His deep-whispered words sent a flush to her cheeks.

"But, nevertheless, I'm glad you've come; I am impatient, after all, for the treasure the next hour will give me. My darling, you do not desire to retract your promise? you are as willing to-day to register your vow as you were when I gave you that?"

His finger touched the golden circlet on her hand, and his proud, passionate eyes were looking down in her own.

"Retreat, Gervaise? Never! Rather do I desire to strengthen it by every bond I may."

He smiled, then bent and kissed her.

"Come, then, my darling. Everything is in readiness; a short five minutes, and we will be each other's forever."

"But, Blanche Chetwynd?"

For the life of her, Barbara could not tell why she asked that. She never knew, until months after, why it was that the words rose spontaneously to her lips, forcing their own utterance; or why, for a second, there uprose before her a sweet, girlish face, with love-lighted eyes.

For a moment Gervaise De Laurian looked at her; then his eyes grew wrathful.

"What has Blanche Chetwynd to do with me, or you?"

"Forgive me, Gervaise, they were idle words."

It was wonderful, almost pitiful, to see how this proud, eagle-hearted girl flung all her pride, her *hauteur* at the feet of her love; but Barbara Lester's was no light, passing emotion, that scarce ruffled the tide of her life. It was a mighty, master current, that bowed all her will to its headlong course.

And Gervaise De Laurian knew this. He knew how entirely he was her master, and he was proud of his conquest, so that now, when he listened to her loving voice and saw her beautiful, graceful girlishness, he smiled down in her wistful eyes.

"I will forgive you. But I can not have you speak so again."

She accepted his arm, and together they walked slowly to the inner chamber of the chapel ruins.

"Now, Barbara, my own, here we begin to tread the same life path. Here I shall solemnly swear to love you to the end. Barbara, you will promise to love me, care for me with all your woman's heart, forever and forever?"

His low, murmurous voice held her in a thrall, delicious as magical.

"Forever and ever, Gervaise, till death do us part."

He kissed her, and led her through the moss-grown door.

CHAPTER III

"IF SHE BUT KNEW!"

It was a spacious place, with old, moth-eaten drapery, and a floor where luxuriant grass grew between the interstices of moldy stones.

At one end, it was inclosed by a hedge of pines, at the other the Passaic river flowed. Above waved tree-tops, a low, tender music lingering in their branches.

An elderly gentleman, with pleasant blue eyes, awaited them.

"Barbara, dear, this is a friend of mine from New York, who is empowered by the right of his office to marry. He is not a clergyman, but you do not object to being married by a justice of the peace?"

Barbara did not care. Why should she? was not her marriage just as sacred solemnized thus?

With luminous eyes she told her lover so, and he turned to the gentleman.

"Mr. Croyden, this is the lady of whom I spoke, Miss Lester. We are ready now."

Hand in hand, under the roofing of Nature's Eternal Temple, with the grand forest aisles about them, and the music of the soft summer winds their wedding hymn, the ceremony was spoken; Gervaise De Laurian had kissed his bride; the officiating gentleman had departed.

"Mrs. Gervaise De Laurian, my wife! my own beautiful bride!"

He whispered the words in her ear as they turned to retrace their steps.

A smile of perfect happiness answered him.

"I am glad it is over, Barbara. I have sometimes feared of losing you. But now, never."

She laid her hand on his arm in a half-serious gesture.

"Gervaise, I have but one request to make. You will grant the first your wife asks? Promise you will not flirt any more with—with—"

"Blanche Chetwynd, you mean?" added he, seeing her hesitate. "I can't promise; as you know, Barbara, a man can't help paying court to a pretty girl like little golden-haired Blanche. But, Barbara, can you trust me? Remember, that as our marriage is to be kept secret—"

Barbara uttered a cry.

"Secret, Gervaise? Our marriage a secret? Oh, I never dreamed of such a thing."

Her cheeks paled, then glowed as she spoke, while Gervaise De Laurian's eyes grew threatening.

"Barbara, you must let me dictate, and without questioning my motives. I want you to distinctly understand I desire our marriage to be a profound secret, until you have my permission to divulge it."

His imperious tones seemed strangely at variance with his impassioned manner a moment before, and as Barbara De Laurian searched earnestly his handsome, flushed face, and met the light in his willful eyes, she began to realize she had found her equal in her husband; that even as she loved, so must she obey, in the strictest meaning of the word. Even as Gervaise loved her, would he rule over her.

While she had been so steadily regarding him, her beautiful lips apart in the astonishment she had felt at his language, he had abruptly laid his hand over her mouth, half-saucily, half-tenderly.

"There, tiger-lily, do not gaze so reproachfully at me. I mean to do what is best for us both, and the only course is to retain our secret, for a while at least. You'll promise me, dearest?"

There still lingered a despotism under his affectionate words; and what could Barbara do but consent?

"Gervaise, I promise."

"I knew you would. And now I want another promise. You asked me not to flirt with Blanche Chetwynd. It is a hard one to keep, Barbara, for, though not so peerless as my royal bride, she is a sweet blossom, and it is far from my nature to pass such by."

Barbara grew stately.

"But, Gervaise, you've no right to flirt again with any woman. You are my husband, and, as a married man, must not devote yourself to young ladies' society as you would have done an hour ago."

Her earnest language burst from her eager lips as she laid her fair, warm hands on his arm.

He smiled; a quick, lightning-like glance of amusement.

"You may be right, Barbara, but don't forget that only to each other are we married. But, will you promise what I was about to ask? never to think of Roy Davenal?"

A hot flush shot over her cheeks, as she impetuously answered:

"Will you never have done with that old-time engagement? Gervaise, Roy and I were mere children then; we never think of such things now. You know I care for no living being but yourself."

Her confession gratified him, and, as they came up to the gate, in the gathering dusk, he kissed her.

"Go in now, my darling. Remember your promise."

He bowed, and she smiled her adieus, as she turned down the path to the house.

Gervaise De Laurian paused and watched her as she walked along the narrow path, her green silken skirt rustling against the grass, her flushed face outlined against the gray sky.

"Beautiful temptress! she has ruined herself and me too, I fear! If she but knew, if she but knew, ever so vaguely!"

A bitter smile broke over his handsome face, and he turned away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPIDER'S WEB.

"BARBARA," said Blanche Chetwynd, as the two girls were sitting on the piazza, and her cheeks flushing as she went on, "do you know I am very much afraid I am allowing myself to think a great deal of Mr. De Laurian?"

Barbara started, but answered pleasantly:

"Mr. De Laurian is a gentleman whom few women could dislike."

She watched Blanche's face while she spoke.

"He certainly is handsome and agreeable; I have heard my father say the De Laurians were renowned for their courtliness and beauty."

"Yes?" and Barbara's eyes betrayed the interest she naturally experienced in her husband's relatives. Her inquiries and assents, though given in a quiet, indifferent manner, were only a mask to her eager anxiety.

"And the De Laurians are wealthy too, Barbara. Not that money would influence me so far as Gervaise is concerned, but I think any girl would prefer a husband who possessed both wealth and beauty."

Her cheeks flushed deeper still as she poured out her sweet, girlish confidences.

"So you have already decided to marry Mr. De Laurian, it seems, Blanche?"

A half-amused smile played on Barbara's lips as she spoke.

Blanche laughed.

"Did I say so? Although, Barbara," and her eyes grew luminous with tenderness, while her voice mellowed to a low, confiding cadence, "I am not ashamed to admit that I love him already."

She raised her eyes to Barbara's, that were flushing darkly.

"You are not angry that I've made you my confidant, Barbara? You're not vexed at my unsolicited secret?"

She spoke in deprecating sweetness of manner, for a dark, angry cloud had settled on Barbara's proud face.

"No—not that you've honored me with your confidence; for that I thank you. But I am sorry you are so girlish, so childish as to believe the attentions of every gentleman you meet are honest. When you are older you will learn that flirtations are more amusing than lasting. Besides, Blanche, there is another reason."

Her voice grew tender as she saw the pained look in Blanche's eyes.

"A reason why I shouldn't like Gervaise De Laurian, Barbara?"

She asked the question in amazement.

"Not for your simply 'liking' him, Blanche. Of course we can all like every one we see, whereas love, particularly such love as you bestow, is not to be frittered away on every one."

"But the reason, Barbara?"

Her clear, questioning eyes were intently regarding Barbara's face; and the dark cheeks glowed under that innocent gaze, as she realized what the true reason was. But she returned Blanche's gaze firmly.

"It is a very simple one, Blanche, dear. Mr. De Laurian is a most egregious flirt, and boasts of his reputation as such."

Slowly the blushes faded off Blanche's face.

"Barbara, no! Gervaise has held my hand many a time; he has whispered to me often; he has—even—kissed me."

Like a molten surge the red tide returned as she leaned nearer Barbara to confide the precious secret.

"Kissed you? When?"

Quickly, jealously, came the words.

"I can't say. I don't know. All I remember is that I feel sure he cares for me; that I know I love him."

In Barbara's face were traces of a conflict, bitterly severe. Should she not tell this trusting young girl the secret she herself despised, and that, while it was heavily binding her down, was as surely building a fearful chasm over which Blanche must fall?

She hesitated; the secret trembled on her lips; the words were ready to be uttered that should save them both from all the misery of their future lifetime.

Then, like some foreshadowing cloud came the memory of her husband's positive commands—and her love leveling all things before it, she decided to allow circumstances to mold themselves.

It was a trifling decision, but mighty results depended thereon; and fate—and the Chetwynd Curse sealed the woe of the two fair women.

"You have been very imprudent, Blanche; and now that I have placed you on your guard against him, you are enabled to cease thinking of him in so tender a manner."

"Cease loving Gervaise, Barbara? I never can, so long as I live!"

"I cannot censure you, Blanche, for your devotion to him as your ideal man; for I think myself he is as perfect—setting aside his flirting propensities—as any woman would want."

A smile that would have been mischievous, had her heart been less full, lighted Blanche's face as she looked at Barbara.

"Perhaps you are a wee whit jealous, Barbara; you are so warm in your admiration while you reprove me for mine."

Barbara's haughtiest curl of lip preceded her answer.

"As a gentleman, I admire him; as a flirt, I detest him."

Her color deepened, and her heart throbbed as she spoke the tame word "admire."

Admire Gervaise De Laurian! She, his wife! She drew her trailing skirts up in a handful of glowing crimson, and nodded a pleasant adieu to Blanche.

"I have letters to prepare for the next mail, Blanche. After dinner we will drive to Paterson for some notions I want."

On the shady piazza she left Blanche, sitting beside the window, where the snowy clematis was tossing its graceful spray.

On a rustic chair, her cheeks robbed of their flushes, her eyes full of a sad, wistful light, she leaned, her sun-bright head resting on her hand.

A quick tread on the graveled walk aroused her from her transient reverie. She caught a glimpse of a face and form that made her spring in sweet confusion from her reclining position.

"Blanche, no, do not rise. I can find myself a seat. Sit still, and tell me if you are glad I have come."

Gervaise De Laurian's dark eyes, all alight with a dangerous fire, were reading her thoughts that were all too plainly mirrored on her pink cheeks, in her soft black eyes.

"Glad? I am always glad to see you, Mr. De Laurian."

"I shall not believe it if you persist in addressing me so formally. My name is Gervaise, Blanche."

She cast down her eyes under his ardent gaze.

"Gervaise, then," she repeated, almost under her breath, the varying tint on her cheeks paling and glowing.

"Thank you, *cherie*. Now, where are Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd, and Miss Barbara?"

He drew his chair nearer as he asked the question.

"Mamma and papa are out driving with Rex, and Barbara has gone to her room to attend to her correspondence."

"Leaving you all alone—with me," he added, tenderly.

She did not reply, for there seemed nothing to say; but her heart was fluttering like a caged bird.

"What do you suppose I came for, this morning, *cherie*?"

"I can easily guess. To practice 'Sweet Genevieve' with Barbara, or have a game of chess with Rex."

She smiled as she spoke, and looked up in his face as he leaned carelessly back in his chair; and a thrill quivered through her as she saw how handsome he was.

He did not smile a reply; his eyes were half-veiled by their long, golden-brown lashes, under which he was intensely regarding her.

"Neither the song nor the game induced me to drive down. I came purposely to see a certain little girl, who is too modest to mention herself in the list of attractions."

Blanche glanced up; but only for a second. His face told more than his words.

With a sudden gesture, he pushed the chair away, and, extending both arms, went up to the girl.

"Can you not tell? do you not know, my darling, why I have come? It was to hear you say, 'Gervaise, I love you!' Will you say it, Blanche, even as I say to you, I love you?"

He drew her head to his breast, and, with the lips that not a month before had greeted his bride, he kissed her pure mouth.

"Say it, Blanche; say it quickly. You little know how I am starving for it."

He held his arms tightly around her, while her hair streamed over his breast, and against his face.

"Oh, Gervaise, let me go. Please, please! You frighten me, indeed you do!"

"Frighten you, my dainty lady bird? Does my love alarm you, whom I would woo as gently as a dove does its mate? Blanche, perhaps you don't love me."

Then she clung closer to him.

"I do! I do! Gervaise, I love you!"

Her beautiful eyes told the secret her lips had feared to disclose.

"But not as I love you, my Blanche, my darling. I know you are mine, though, and we will engage ourselves, shall we?"

He drew from his finger a *solitaire* diamond, too large for Blanche's taper fingers.

"Never mind; you can wear it on your watch chain, and by that means keep our betrothal secret better. You will not tell any one of it, for a time?"

"If such is your desire, Gervaise, I see no serious objection in so doing, although I prefer that my parents should be acquainted with it."

She plead with her eyes, though her lips concurred with his will.

"But I insist upon Miss Barbara's being kept in perfect ignorance. I specially insist upon that."

"That shall be exactly as you wish. Barbara shall never hear of our engagement until you tell her. There, Gervaise, does that satisfy you?"

She laid her warm fingers on his hair, while he lay back in kingly grace against the chair, receiving her gentle caresses as naturally as though she had been created for that especial purpose and no other.

As she spoke, a smile of triumphal pride and gratified delight spread over his face.

"That promise, faithfully kept, is all I ask. Now, my darling, I am sure I see the Chetwynd carriage entering the drive—yes, it is. Let me kiss you good-by, Blanche, darling, and after lunch I will come for you and Miss Barbara for a ride to the Falls, up at Paterson."

He arose, and took her in his arms, and kissed her again and again. Then he laid one hand on her shoulder, and stood gazing intently on her scarlet face.

Neither heard footsteps, or knew of a presence, till Barbara's high, clear voice broke the delicious stillness.

CHAPTER V.

PLAYING WITH FATE.

"WHAT does this mean? I pray to be informed. Mr. De Laurian, will you explain? Blanche Chetwynd, what did I tell you?"

Blanche turned to hide her suffused face, but Gervaise confronted her, his eyes flashing.

"And permit me to inquire what you have been telling Miss Chetwynd?"

There was awful fury in his voice as he spoke, that betrayed the rage, the fear he felt lest Blanche knew all—yet he was sure she never would have acted as she had, had she dreamed of the true state of affairs.

"I told her, sir, that you were too conscienceless a flirt to care, really, for her; if you made a pretense of it even, it would end as other flirtations have ended."

Her speech came fluently, and her eyes were steadily fixed on his, while her cheek grew pale as she spoke.

De Laurian's lips parted in a relieved smile, and his eyes lost their steely glitter.

"Indeed, Miss Barbara! I am everlastingly indebted to you for such a recommendation to Miss Chetwynd. However, I need hardly say, your words are destined to be proven false."

Barbara sprang to his side in a towering rage.

"Beware, Gervaise De Laurian, how you accuse me of falsehoods! Remember who I am!"

Her deep, warning tone made Blanche turn her head in quick surprise, but not quickly enough to see the unspoken threat in De Laurian's eyes, or observe the defiance in Barbara's.

She looked inquiringly at Gervaise, who, with a profound bow to Barbara, laughed assuringly to Blanche.

"I certainly shall not forget who you are. A most beautiful woman, whom few men can see without loving; whom few women can know without envying."

His eyes, now turned so that Blanche might not see his face, were full of that light that shone in them when he murmured to his wife his love assurances; and, as Barbara blushed and smiled in the returning tide of confidence, she extended her hand.

He took it, and pressed it passionately; then raised it to his lips.

All this instantaneous tableau had been acted while Blanche had gone to the edge of the piazza to watch her parents alight. During that second, Gervaise and Barbara had renewed their vows, and apparently fully comprehended each other.

Blanche came through the window toward them.

"They have returned, and now that lunch is ready, why not let us all sit down together? Mr. De Laurian, you surely will stay?"

"If you will promise to go with Miss Barbara and me to the Falls."

Barbara's face did not portray the joy she felt at the prospect of a ride beside her husband, but in her heart she exulted, and secretly pitied Blanche that she, all unconscious, was only invited to allay any suspicions.

Blanche, her cheeks flushed with delight, gave an assent, wondering if Barbara really did think Gervaise was a flirt, and trying to imagine what she would say when she heard that, in spite of all her prophetic warnings, Gervaise De Laurian had actually proposed to her, and that the diamond on her watch-chain was the seal of their betrothal.

The lunch-bell rung, and, first greeting Mr. Chetwynd and his wife, afterward shaking hands with Rex, De Laurian insisted upon escorting both girls to the breakfast parlor. Laughing and chatting, first to the dark-haired woman on his right, on whose finger he had placed the wedding-ring, and in whose ears he had spoken the sacred words, "*my wife*," then to the golden-haired girl, whose maiden heart had passed forever out of her keeping into his unworthy hands; in whose eyes still dawned the love-light awakened by his earnest protestations of abiding affection, Gervaise De Laurian went on, his heart beating high with wicked pleasure as he gloried in successful daring; as he thought of these two peerless women who acknowledged him their heart's sovereign.

Lunch was comfortably over, when the Chetwynd carriage was driven up to the door.

Barbara and Blanche hastened to change their dresses for others more suitable, and it was when alone together that Barbara reproved Blanche for lack of confidence in her advice.

"But he seems so good, Barbara, and, after all, why should I not receive his attentions as well as you?"

Barbara did not tell her why, and a pang of pity for the girl shot through her heart.

"He does not flirt with me, Blanche. Besides—nothing. Will this dress do?"

She had abruptly changed the topic of conversation, and took from the wardrobe a maize-colored silk.

"I will wear it, at any rate, and my India shawl," she said, then thinking how her husband admired the dress and shawl.

"It is very becoming, Barbara," said Blanche.

"I shall wear my white cashmere and scarlet wrap."

And Blanche inwardly remembered hearing her lover say she looked like a "sunset fairy" in that heavy, richly hanging dress, with the vivid glowing of the scarlet to relieve it.

Both dressing for the one they loved best; each striving to appear perfect in his eyes; and he, pacing the piazza, with a fragrant cigar between his lips, planning his afternoon's work.

First, he would acquaint Mr. Chetwynd with his engagement to Blanche.

He found the gentleman in the library; a few words of courteous interchange, and then he made known his errand.

"I have come to deliberately rob you of your choicest treasure—if, indeed, I have not already taken it. I love Blanche, Mr. Chetwynd, and have told her so. She returns that love. May I have her?"

A sudden graveness overspread the gentleman's face.

"Are you aware of the fate that hangs over her head? The Curse of Chetwynd Chase has been gathering for years to break on my innocent Blanche's head?"

De Laurian was impressed by the solemnity of Mr. Chetwynd's manner.

"I have heard of it, but I do not hesitate to say I can shield her from every harm. Whose arm is stronger than a husband's, or whose heart stouter? I want her, and despite the Curse she shall be mine if you give her to me."

"You must give me time for an answer. You tell me you are sure you love my child? I have often found myself wondering about it, half concluding, at times, that you did; then your attentions to Barbara Lester would become so marked, I decided you were trying to win her."

"That is true, Mr. Chetwynd; but, remember, I have been placed between two as lovely women as the sun shone on, and who, think you, *could* have acted differently? I have been analyzing my feelings, and have learned it is Blanche Chetwynd I love."

Very proud, imperious and strong he looked, standing there, in the full flush of a perfect manhood, pleading his suit with a noble fervor that became a better man; and courtly Mr.

Chetwynd, who had seen handsome men before, noticed the kindling of his violet eyes, the proud curving of his lips, under the heavy amber mustache, and did not wonder that Blanche loved him.

Then he extended his hand cordially.

"Mr. De Laurian, I tell you frankly, I would rather you would have my daughter than any man I know. Will you brave this Curse for her sweet sake? will you take her with her dower of inherited vengeance? love her amid whatever misery may arise, cherish her through any gulfs of trouble, even if you are sacrificed in trying to save her? I say "trying," because she can not be saved from Lady Constanza's Curse; it can not be averted by human hand, and they say fate will lead the youngest daughter of the house of Chetwynd to work out her own anguish with her own hands. I do not pretend to unravel this mystery, I only believe it as I believe I am a living, breathing man. I say, you will do so to her as you will call on your Maker to do to you?"

De Laurian bowed his handsome head in reverent assent.

"I swear it, Mr. Chetwynd; and the Curse that lights on my darling's head shall first break its weight on mine."

"Then I greet you my son, Gervaise, my boy!"

He grasped De Laurian's hand, and they exchanged a warm friendly greeting.

And the while, Blanche and Barbara, up in their room, were wondering at the low current of conversation that came floating indistinctly to their ears, and then Mr. Chetwynd's voice, clear and ringing, sounded in the hall below.

"Blanche! will you step down a moment?"

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE'S HIDE AND SEEK.

SHE turned almost abruptly away from Barbara, in whose hair she was twining a spray of dwarf pink flowers, and hastened down the stairs, leaving Barbara alone at the mirror, wondering if Gervaise would find any opportunity for a kiss or a caress, or a whispered love word.

Little recked she of the scene transpiring below, as Mr. Chetwynd closed the library door after Blanche.

At a glance, Blanche comprehended the situation, and her heart beat rapidly as her father led her up to De Laurian.

"My daughter, this gentleman has asked for you in marriage. He loves you; you love him. I give you, my only daughter, my youngest born daughter, with the awful inherited Curse of Chetwynd Chase on your girlish head, to Gervaise De Laurian to be his wife, through good and ill, bliss and misery, for life, death and eternity."

He laid her hand in De Laurian's; her pure hand, in one so false.

With unshed tears lying on her lashes, Mrs. Chetwynd, who had been a silent witness, touched Blanche's forehead with her lips, then kissed Gervaise.

"Remember, my children, this must be sacredly confidential. I have but the one request to make, which I am sure will be granted. I would request the engagement retained perfectly secret for several months, until Blanche has attained her twentieth birthday. Mr. Chetwynd remembers this to be the custom of our family, if they are betrothed before that age. Then we will announce it with all *eclat*. Even from Barbara, my dear, I wish you to keep the news. May I depend on you to gratify me in this one respect?"

Mrs. Chetwynd smiled as she spoke, as if she thought it would be a very serious thing for Blanche to withhold her all-important secret from Barbara, with whom she was naturally so very intimate.

De Laurian's heart was fairly throbbing with excessive exultation. What could have been better than that Mrs. Chetwynd herself should have suggested the secrecy from Barbara? He smiled at Blanche, who gladly agreed to keep their vows from Barbara's knowledge till the following June, when, on her twentieth birthday, both engagement and speedy wedding would be announced.

Then she went slowly up the stairs, her hands clasped over her heart to still, if possible, its mad throbs of joy, fearful lest her telltale face should reveal to Barbara the sweet secret.

Stopping at the wardrobe, she selected a jaunty turban with a red cock's feather; then went on to Barbara.

"Are you ready, Blanche? I am, and waiting. Here's your wrap. Is Mr. De Laurian waiting?"

Blanche took the garment, with a low "thank you," and the two descended to the piazza, where De Laurian awaited them.

"Bring them back by dinner-time, Mr. De Laurian."

He promised Mrs. Chetwynd, and the carriage rolled rapidly along the wide, graveled drive, and out upon the main road.

It was a charming afternoon; and, the turnpike once gained, De Laurian relaxed the strict reins on the horses, and leaned against the cushions of the carriage.

"Is not the scenery fine in this delicious autumn haze?"

It was Barbara's voice that broke the silence that had intervened since they had left Chetwynd Chase.

"Perfectly; and a most fitting time and place for me to entertain my lady guests."

"As if we couldn't entertain ourselves, Sir Conceit!"

Blanche laughed, and Barbara relaxed into a smile.

"Doubtless you could, although, you will admit, the subject of edification would be gossip or fashion."

"Or a more congenial subject, perhaps—love."

Barbara spoke in a low, intense voice, glancing at Gervaise.

His eyes sent back an answering light, and Blanche, fearful lest her incarnadine cheeks should reveal her thoughts, looked industriously through the window.

"It does seem strange that love is the only topic ever handled by poet, artist, or author; that is love and its modifications, which are envy, jealousy or revenge. So far as I am concerned, though I am neither painter, poet or romancer, I know love to be a most delightful experience."

Blanche's veil tumbled softly down over her face, and under its filmy folds Gervaise detected the brightness of her eyes that she could not hide.

"Then you have loved, Mr. De Laurian?"

Barbara thought how strangely the question sounded as it left her lips, and a smile of amusement was in her eyes as she thought how she and Gervaise must converse thus, under the semblance of indifference.

Blanche would not mistrust how direct the application was of such commonplace remarks while through them she and De Laurian conveyed their love.

"Have I loved," you asked, Miss Barbara? I have; I do, most earnestly, most devotedly. I love with a fervor that never can be quenched till my heart be chilled by death."

His eyes were flooded with that dangerous siren light that made those two women's hearts throb so wildly.

"How is it with you? You have questioned me, now let me elicit an answer from you."

"Well," returned Barbara, her voice coming low and thrilling, "I love one who returns my affection as warmly as I can ask. I love him as no one else could. I will be true to the death."

She was nervously toying with the lace cover of her parasol, her eyes cast down, the long lashes veiling their light, and Gervaise De Laurian was watching her passionate face, triumphing that all that beauty was his.

"But, supposing he were false, Barbara?"

Gervaise spoke almost before he thought, and the flashing black eyes were raised in a second.

"I would not believe him false. He is not, I know, but admitting the fact that he *dare* be—ah, I can not express what he would receive at my hands."

Gervaise laughed.

"No one could be false to you, Miss Barbara. No one would. Depend upon this one whom you love, and trust him even as you say you do. He were less than man did he not worship you."

A gleam of exquisite joy darted from her eyes as he spoke.

Turning to Blanche, who had listened to it all, he laughingly challenged her.

"Come, Miss Blanche, tell us if you are acquainted with this rosy god?"

"You are too personal. I am almost afraid to confess."

"Then there is a confession? To reassure you, Miss Blanche, I am very confident there must be, somewhere on this wide hemisphere, some one who loves you truly, lastingly."

The scarlet flowed in a quick tide to her face, and she averted her head, withal so thankful for the delicate avowal he had made; but she strove to laugh it off.

"You must be a wizard, Mr. De Laurian."

"There, that reminds me. Why need we three insist on calling each other by such foolishly formal titles? I am sure we all are each other's best friend, and I propose from this moment we be 'Barbara,' 'Blanche' and 'Gervaise' to each other."

The girls were only too delighted. Blanche, that she dared to address him so; Barbara, that his strategy was so admirable, for her heart yearned to call his loved name again.

Meanwhile, engrossed in pleasant conversation, they had traversed the distance between Chetwynd Chase and Passaic Falls, and as they slowly drove through the shady avenues, De Laurian still contrived that all his remarks should appear personal to both, yet not arouse suspicion in either.

"That reminds me, Barbara, of your vengeance you spoke of an hour ago. See that fissure just to the right of us, that extends the whole length of the rock? I can imagine you thrusting your unloyal lover down there, with your star eyes above him, the last light the world should hold for him."

Blanche shivered.

"Gervaise, don't talk so." And Barbara laughed. "I might do more than that."

Gervaise laughed it off. He was so brilliant, so fascinating, and Barbara's eyes grew darkly tender as they rode home in the gathering gloom, while his hand clasped hers under the protecting shawl, and he stooped, now and then, under pretext of arranging the affghan, to whisper, in such a heart-stirring tone, "My beautiful wife!"

Silently happy she nestled beside him, caring for naught; knowing his presence was her very life; his love, that glanced in his eyes, her more than life.

On the other side, her scarlet wrap clinging closely around her white, pure face, her sun-bright hair streaming in the brisk west wind, Blanche was quietly sitting, with De Laurian's arm around her shoulder, dreaming over the way he had murmured "my own," so many times that blissful afternoon.

So they rode homeward, with the round yellow harvest moon slowly coming up from behind a low-lying bank of clouds; with the soothing music of the Passaic coming to their ears. These two women, each blessing Gervaise De Laurian for the love that he had given her; each thankful that in the fullness of that love, he made them so perpetually conscious of it, and yet preserved it a hidden treasure from the other.

And Gervaise De Laurian himself, so handsome and defiant, with a smile on his lip, that in its beauty and purity belied the laugh of horrible triumph in his heart, rode home between these two women, whose happiness he was deliberately crushing, whose lives he was forever blasting.

Well was it for him that the golden light of the harvest moon did not lighten his purposes as it did his faultless face; as it had frozen the smile of serene happiness on the lip of his unconscious victims as he lifted them carefully from the carriage, with a caress for both, as they ascended the steps of the piazza.

Little did he dream that the Curse of Chetwynd Chase would culminate through his wickedness, and that his own was the hand that would pour the vials of wrath on another head than his own.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW ON THE PATH.

"WE'VE company for you, Barbara, Blanche. It's fortunate you've returned in such good season, especially you, Barbara, for your old friend and admirer is extremely anxious to see you."

"To see me? Who can it be? I have no such devoted cavalier."

Her glance wandered involuntarily to De Laurian, who with the light in his eyes she had learned to dread, was regarding her intently.

"Who can it be, now, I wonder?" retorted Mrs. Chetwynd, laughingly. "Sure enough, who is the gentleman whose letters lie in a certain casket in Miss Barbara Lester's room, all tied with blue?"

A sudden conscious flushing of her cheeks, more than Mrs. Chetwynd's words, aroused a demon in Gervaise De Laurian's breast, that required more exorcising than could easily be exerted. Blanche for the moment, wondered why her lover looked so darkly; then she dismissed the thought with a chiding to her own heart for a judgment against him. A brief second Gervaise had looked sternly at Barbara; then with a gesture she rightly interpreted as jealousy, he

turned to Blanche, all smiles and attention. Mrs. Chetwynd's voice broke the oppressively awkward silence.

"You do not seem desirous of welcoming him, so I will myself summon him from the parlor. Mr. Davenal!"

Like lightning De Laurian turned around, and though Barbara's face was purposely averted, she felt the glances of rage he cast on her, as, in answer to the summons, light, quick footsteps approached.

The door opened and Roy Davenal entered the library. With a bow to the party, he went straight up to Barbara, who, with wildly throbbing heart, as she tried to imagine the effect of this meeting on her husband, awaited his coming.

"Barbara Lester! I am so delighted to see you again; and Blanche, how do I find you?"

He extended a hand to each, but, after cordially clasping her fragile fingers, let her remove them, while he retained Barbara's, and closed the remaining hand over her palm.

His admiration was too sincere for coquetry, and as with elaborate politeness Gervaise De Laurian acknowledged the introduction, he decided that Roy Davenal was in love with his wife.

He surveyed his rival from head to foot; and as he acknowledged what a fine-looking man this Roy Davenal was, he also concluded to flank him.

It was a serious business this double affair of his; and if he possessed unlimited boldness to attempt to carry it through, he also possessed an unmeasurable amount of jealousy that enabled him to prevent Roy Davenal from courting his wife, or paying attention to Blanche Chetwynd, even while he must attend to both himself *sub rosa*. But, as to think was to act with Gervaise De Laurian, so, while he critically disposed of handsome Roy Davenal, so did he decide upon the course he himself would pursue.

First, he was going to let Roy Davenal suppose he was in love with Blanche Chetwynd, which, of course, was partly true, but of which Barbara had not the vaguest suspicion. This plan, while it left him free to keep good his protestations to Blanche, would serve to remind Barbara of the promise they had mutually made, viz.: that if she ever flirted with Roy Davenal, he should not hesitate to do the same with Blanche Chetwynd. He never, for a moment, supposed Barbara was playing a game as deep as his own; he only supposed that Davenal was in love with her, and that there was nothing between them. In this he was vastly mistaken, as he learned afterward. His mind made up thus far, he dismissed all thoughts of after-results, and began his part in the tragedy that darkened from that hour, by turning to Blanche with a smile that set her heart a-flutter.

"Blanche, if you are not fatigued, suppose we take a promenade? Mrs. Chetwynd, may she go? I assure you I will take excellent care of her."

Barbara turned at the words, and was in time to see him place the scarlet wrap over her shoulders, and clasp the silver fastening.

He drew her hand through his arm, and, with a glance as swift as meaning at Barbara, passed out the open French window.

"Shall we follow, Barbara? I have so much to say."

Roy Davenal bent low over her crimson cheeks.

Only an instant did she hesitate, as she thought:

"I will be equal with Gervaise De Laurian. He shall see I can flirt as well as he can."

Then, with a bewitching smile, she answered Davenal, loud enough to be also heard by Gervaise and Blanche; and her husband ground his heel on the graveled path as the musical sound reached him.

"Thank you, Roy; I will go. I know nothing I should prefer to a moonlight walk with you alone."

And Roy Davenal, in the fulness of his love, believed what she said!

"And now, my own, tell me every thing that has happened since we parted, in the spring. Have you been well? and happy, and true?"

They had gone only a little way from the river bank, and it seemed to the girl who leaned so heavily on his arm that his voice was lower, and more intense than ever she had heard it; and a shiver thrilled her, but she unhesitatingly answered him.

"Well, and happy, and true, Roy."

How she abhorred herself for that deliberate lie! but there, in the moonlight, before them walked the two who were goading her on to it.

"I need not have asked it, for my heart is the

judge of yours, yet I am so happy to find you are my very own, after all."

"After all?" Roy, what do you mean?"

Her heart beat quicker for the moment, and yet she knew her secret was her own.

"That gentleman I met—that Mr. De Laurian—has a reputation that has reached all the way to my Western home. Blanche's lover, I see now."

"Well?"

Barbara answered calmly, but her eyes glittered with a light that told how strongly her heart resented whatever reflection Roy might cast upon her husband.

"I heard he was a frequent inmate of Mr. Chetwynd's mansion, and knowing how beautifully bewitching you were, my Barbara, how could I help wondering if he would win you over to him?"

"You forgot Blanche, Roy. You see for yourself his devotion. Besides, how could I play you false?"

Why did she not tell him, then and there? Why did her voice, fraught with such liquid tenderness, lead her deeper into anguish at the last, and him further from happiness?

"You could not, I know, and that I have wronged you by the suspicion, let me beg your pardon. Still, you can hardly censure me when you know it was love that prompted the fond jealousy. To lose you, my Barbara, would be worse than death."

He wound his arms around her waist, and kissed her mouth; while, just in advance of them, she saw Blanche clinging to her husband's arm, and his haughty head bowed in tender solicitation. Her innate womanliness cried out against this double outrage, but a lurking devil in her heart prompted her to deal as she was dealt by; not thinking it was Gervaise De Laurian she was outmaneuvering, foul-hearted though he was, but her own self, this guileless Blanche, her noble lover, who, had he known what she could have told him, would have fled from her as from a plague-tainted creature.

But, to Roy Davenal, Barbara Lester was the embodiment of all that was good, pure and womanly; and, in the might of his love, he had invested her with the qualifications of a goddess. That tableau before her—and little recked she that all was truth that she thought a bit of clever, pointed acting—galled her, and with a firm resolution to banish the admonitions of conscience while she detected no signs of a discontinuance on her husband's part of this wretched farce, she turned around toward Roy; a sigh, that she could not repress, escaping her lips.

"Did I hear aright? Barbara, you are not wounded at what I said?"

"I am not. I happened to recall a memory of the past that gave me a momentary heart pang. That is all."

"Barbara, do you know I can truthfully say I do not regret any of my part that concerns you? By the by, dearest, I came across the most charming ballad the other day that so fully coincides with my feelings. Shall I sing it?"

"If you will, yes."

Barbara was gazing at the pair before them, and she spoke in feverish haste.

"Mr. De Laurian and Blanche will doubtless be a delighted audience," responded Roy, gayly.

"But I am perfectly willing they shall consider the language personal."

His clear tenor notes, mellow and musical, sounded out on the still autumn night; and, as Barbara clung to his arm, wondering what her husband would think, and smiling bitterly as she thought how much more guilty she was than he, De Laurian and Blanche involuntarily slackened their steps to listen.

"Oh, Genevieve, my early love,
The years but make thee dearer far,
My heart shall never, never rove
From thee, my bright, my guiding star!
For me the past brings no regret;
Whatever the years may bring to me,
I bless the hour when first we met,
The hour that gave thy love to me."

In a flood of exquisite, pensive melody the words died softly away.

"Gervaise, is not that lovely?"

Blanche Chetwynd, her eyes wet with unshed tears, looked up in her lover's face.

"Perfect. So touching, and expressive of my feelings to you, my own."

"As if I did not know that! And while I am so happy in your love, Gervaise, I rejoice that Barbara's heart is so fully Roy's. They have been engaged these three years."

"Engaged?"

He started involuntarily, his eyes lighting up with a dangerous glow.

"Why, yes. Did you not know? They will be married in the early spring."

"Married! Barbara Lester married in the spring!"

He repeated the words in a low, hoarse tone, that made Blanche look at him in extreme surprise.

"Why, Gervaise, what of that?"

Her words recalled him to the actualities of the present, while they warned him of his part to play.

"Nothing, Blanche, dear. Only it seems so odd, somehow, to associate Barbara and marriage. I should as soon have thought of hearing of your marriage with—well with—"

"Some old married man?"

And Blanche laughingly supplied the most ridiculous comparison she could think of.

For a second his cheek burned, and his dark eyes steadily studied her sweet, guileless face.

CHAPTER VIII

STEEL TO STEEL

It was only for a second, then he laughed.

"Not quite as bad as that. But, really, Miss Lester is a splendid girl, and Mr. Davenal will secure a prize—when he gets her."

Blanche did not detect the hidden meaning of the remark.

"Indeed he will. And she, as well, in him, for Roy is a noble fellow."

Gervaise gently pressed the fingers that lay on his sleeve.

"Be careful, little girl, or I shall grow jealous."

"You mustn't."

She looked into his face with a suddenly-grown serious expression of her own, where the blushes fought for the mastery over the earnest pallor of her cheeks.

"You never will have occasion to be jealous, Gervaise, for I shall be true. When you are false to me—and I know that never will be, even in thought—then you may accuse me of disloyalty."

He never winced as he met her womanly eyes as she spoke in such proud confidence; but there occurred to him the vivid contrast of her purity and truth, and his foulness and the living lie he knew he was personating.

At the steps, in a patch of unbroken moonlight, the party met.

"You have enjoyed this perfect evening, Blanche?—Mr. De Laurian?"

"For myself I can say I have, very much," returned Blanche, half timidly, as if ashamed to confess she cared for the exclusive society of Mr. De Laurian.

"I can safely say I never enjoyed an evening more. As you remarked, Mr. Davenal, the night is perfect; then, with a most congenial companion, who could help having a delightful time?"

It was Gervaise who spoke, and, as he did so, looked meaningfully down at Blanche. Then he addressed Barbara, quite abruptly:

"I may presume to inquire of you, Miss Barbara, if you feel repaid for your trouble in preparing for the walk?"

His cool tone, so sarcastic and ironical, but served to increase to further heat the flames of her jealous anger.

"You may presume to inquire, and, as my escort was a near and very dear personal friend, you will not be surprised to know I greatly enjoyed the opportunity that gave me his exclusive society—which I prize above all privileges."

"Thank you, my darling."

Roy spoke impulsively, little dreaming the effect of his words.

With kindling eyes, yet in a voice in which only Barbara detected the smothered fury, he retorted:

"You are then in a very enviable frame of mind, Miss Lester. Permit me to congratulate you and Mr. Davenal that such choice spirits have met."

Barbara bowed, frigidly.

Roy Davenal wondered if Mr. De Laurian were always so crisp in his compliments.

Just then Mrs. Chetwynd came in through the window.

"Come, girls, it is time for your beauty—sleep."

Gervaise instantly extended his hand to Blanche.

"Good-night, then."

Then he reached it to Barbara.

Cool and haughty, with the air of an empress, she merely inclined her head, keeping her fingers clasped on Roy Davenal's shoulder.

De Laurian bit his tawny mustache in fierce vexation as he went down the steps, and remembered how another man had called his wife "darling."

All that night, in the sleepless hours, he tossed on his pillow; all the next morning the endearing epithet rung in his ears; then, when the hour came for the usual afternoon ride, he had arranged his plans of action.

In his little pony-phaeton he drove from Paterson down to Chetwynd Chase, and found Roy Davenal on the veranda, and a low basket-buggy drawn up by the carriage mount.

The two exchanged greetings, and Roy explained he was about to take Barbara for a ride.

"I beg pardon for interfering in the least, Mr. Davenal, but I fear Miss Chetwynd will think you a little unfriendly in devoting yourself so assiduously to Barbara. You are a guest of her father, you know, and permit me to suggest that you accept her to-day and leave your betrothed to me."

De Laurian spoke in a half-earnest, half-confidential way that no one could have taken offense at, much less Roy, who instantly appreciated the delicate advice.

"You are right, De Laurian; I'll make amends. Barbara will excuse me if I desire it, won't you?"

He lifted his hat as she came down the steps with Blanche.

"Won't I what?" she returned, as she bestowed a careless nod on him.

"Accept a seat in Mr. De Laurian's phaeton, while I improve the opportunity offered of paying my regards to Blanche."

Barbara looked at Gervaise. He telegraphed her a stern command.

Then she smiled triumphantly.

"I prefer not, Roy. You know I have counted so on this ride. Blanche would rather entertain Mr. De Laurian, I'm sure."

Blanche blushed.

"I'm sure I'll ride wherever it is best. I would like a nice little chat with you, Roy."

Blanche had received an encouraging smile from De Laurian ere she replied.

Barbara grew frigid in a moment.

"Oh, if it's a conspiracy, I'm sure I wouldn't attempt to interfere. It must be a great pity to deprive you of your 'nice little chat.' Mr. De Laurian, I am at your disposal. Do you wish me to ride with you?"

Her coldness did not in the least affect his sunny courtesy.

"I shall be too glad. Let me assist you to the phaeton."

He would have taken her hand, but she sprang in herself; a hard glitter in her steely-black eyes, a fever spot burning on either cheek.

Roy had lifted Blanche in and they drove on, De Laurian following, out of hearing distance.

Not a word was spoken till they had cleared the grounds of Chetwynd Chase; then, with a horrible deliberateness, De Laurian turned toward Barbara.

"Well?"

In that one word was concentrated all the pent-up emotions he had nursed since the previous evening.

"What do you mean, Barbara De Laurian, by your conduct? What am I to understand you mean?"

Threatening authority was conveyed in every intonation of his voice as he glared at her.

She lifted her eyes boldly to his face.

"What am I, your wife, to understand you mean?"

If De Laurian was angry, Barbara was a match for him.

"Drop me out the question and answer me, I command. What does Roy Davenal mean by calling you *darling*?"

"What you mean when you call me that name, I presume. I did not ask him to explain."

She was cool and calm, a sneering smile curling on her proud lips.

"But, woman, by what right does he say it?"

"A prior right, man. He knew me and loved me long before you saw me."

"And coming from the presence of him, who, less than six weeks ago, pronounced you my wife, you promised me never to care for him again. Where has your honor gone?"

"To the same place as yours, Gervaise De Laurian. What did you promise me concerning Blanche Chetwynd?"

She laughed as she spoke, a low, sneering laugh that made him turn fiercely on her, and snatch her hands as they lay idly, gracefully over each other.

"See, here, Barbara De Laurian! I have heard him call you *darling*; I have seen him view you with eyes of love; I have learned you were betrothed to him. Barbara! Barbara! do you know what you are doing?"

His voice lost some of its harsh wrathfulness

as he repeated her name; he had been seeing how gloriously beautiful she was in this new phase of character, and he feared, lest, through this Roy Davenal, he might lose her, after all.

"Barbara, I ask, what are you doing?"

"What are you doing?"

Their eyes met with the same inquiry in both their depths.

A silence followed; then, by a mighty effort, for she loved him so, and so longed for a loving word or glance, she spoke his name:

"Gervaise."

Her voice was soft, and it needed but a kind word or a tender look from him to sweep away all the ice barriers.

"If we have acted wrong there is pardon and repentance."

Her siren tones, tones that he so loved, renewed the jealousy-dimmed flame of love; he let fall her hands, and wound his arms around her waist.

"There is no use—I love you so, I love you so, my wife!"

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"And I, Gervaise, was vexed and jealous that you would not believe I loved no one but you. I do not care for Roy Davenal, but I fear he loves me. You are my all, and in all, my husband."

"Then let us forget the past and begin anew. But, Barbara, I must have you all to myself. We have been married six weeks now, and made no tour yet, which, of course, seemed advisable, considering the secrecy imposed upon us. But, my dearest, although I must compel a continued privacy concerning our marriage, still can we not arrange a trip that will appear ostensible to the Chetwynds?"

She shook her head negatively.

"I fear not."

CHAPTER IX.

BEWARE! BEWARE!

DE LAURIAN smiled at her decisive manner.

"You are hasty in your conclusion, my Barbara, are you not?"

"I do not see how it can be done, Gervaise. I do so dislike these secret affairs. Do let us tell them and have done with it. I do not anticipate any trouble, and if there should arise any, we can go away—to England."

She laid her hand on his sleeve while she spoke.

"Barbara, my darling, let me tell you a little confidence. Between you and I there are many good reasons why we may not divulge this affair. First, what think you Roy Davenal will say?"

He watched her narrowly, and a satisfied smile betokened the success of his first appeal.

"Then—remember this is sacredly confidential—Mr. Chetwynd has spoken to me about Blanche. You have heard them mention the Curse of Chetwynd Chase, haven't you? That is to fall on Blanche's head—she being the youngest daughter—in the shape of desertion, dishonor and death. Mr. Chetwynd tells me Blanche loves me; he has asked me to marry her, as in case of a happy marriage dishonor could not ensue, desertion would not—as for death, that will come whether or not."

Barbara uttered a faint cry of pain.

"Wait, my darling. He wants me to marry Blanche, as I say, and, if you notice, both he and Mrs. Chetwynd are constantly giving me opportunities of cultivating her society."

With quivering mouth Barbara waited till he paused.

"And you love—"

"Only my glowing tropical bird, before whose brilliant beauty Blanche pales as the lily before the rose."

He kissed "the rose" passionately to prove his assertion.

"So you see, my darling," he continued, "why I desire to take you away. The Chetwynds will see me gradually cease my attentions to Blanche, which, for friendship's sake, I have paid, and their minds will be prepared for the news I wish to give them, while you are away. I desire to bear the brunt of it myself."

She thanked him for his brave consideration with her most bewitching smile, while a gleam lighted his eyes as he congratulated himself on the success of his plans.

"Then you'll come with me, my darling?"

He whispered softly.

"Tell me your arrangements first, please!"

"Have you no friend in the West—no lady who would invite you for three months or so?"

She shook her head; he smiled at her obtuseness.

"Well, then, if you should receive a letter

from a very old school-friend, whom you had forgotten, who begged for a visit, couldn't you go, think—even if I were the friend who wrote the letter?"

Gradually the force of the strategy appeared to her; she blushed, then laughed.

"Oh, Gervaise, you are an adept! But our combined absence! People will talk."

"Let them. You will not be here to be annoyed, and the certificate can be displayed when we return to Chetwynd Chase."

His careless, hopeful enthusiasm inspired her; and she gave her word.

"I will prepare for the journey immediately, laughable as it seems for the bride of Gervaise De Laurian to steal forth alone on her wedding tour."

An amused smile accompanied her words.

Just then the other carriage halted, and they all alighted to rest for a few minutes.

It was a charming place, where the fragrant spiciness of the pine grove perfumed the air.

"Do you know what this pine odor reminds me of? Or do none of you believe that scents will carry one irresistibly back to old-time memories?"

Roy Davenal looked meaningfully at Barbara as they walked over the leaf-strewn ground.

"I, for one, believe it," she returned. "I can recollect how, one June night, when I was the merest child, they took me to see the corpse of a friend, the dearest playmate I had; she was covered, almost, with geraniums, and since then, their smell sickens and frightens me."

She shivered as she spoke. A little silence followed her words; then Roy gently spoke.

"After unfortunately leading your thoughts in so grave a channel, I fear I should not mention what I was about to propose."

Barbara laughed—a laugh that grated on Roy's ear. He was peculiarly sensitive, and, until now, Barbara's voice had never made but music for him.

If her laugh annoyed him, the words that followed caused strange, sad surprise.

"You needn't mind. She has been dead years and years, and, heart-broken though I was, I assure you I am perfectly resigned now."

That heartlessness was the first link of the broken chain; that hour the date Roy Davenal remembered in after days, when he had occasion to be thankful that ever the chain was sundered.

For a moment the silence was awkward; then De Laurian broke it.

"Suppose we walk on until we meet the old fortune-teller whose hut is somewhere among these mysterious shades? We can pay her a visit, and have the mysterious future unrolled to our eyes by her prophetic sayings."

"I agree, Mr. De Laurian, only I do hope she'll not tell the truth."

Barbara gave him a look he fully comprehended; then he addressed Blanche.

"You also wish she may not speak the truth?"

She laughed, and shook her head gayly.

"As if I wanted all my bad qualities exposed!"

"I differ from you, ladies," said Roy, much more gravely than the occasion called for. "For myself, I prefer the entire truth—much as I doubt her ability to speak it. You are not afraid of her witcheries, De Laurian?"

"I? I afraid of a fortune-teller? She might swear I were a pirate, denounce me as a gambler, a murderer; or call me a—a—"

"Gay deceiver; that will finish the programme," Roy interpolated, merrily.

"Exactly. Nothing she will say can affect me."

He smiled half defiantly, and just then they came upon the low thatched hut, whose sole inhabitant was bending over the pile of light kindlings she had collected for her evening fire.

She looked up as the party approached, and greeted them by a slight nod.

She was an old woman, scantily dressed, whose face was withered and brown, yet of pleasant expression. Her keen, sunken black eyes were kindly in their scrutiny as they surveyed the quartette before her.

"We have come to have you inquire of our future, auntie."

De Laurian bowed elaborately.

"I can do it. Come within, while I read you the hidden secrets you desire."

She pointed to the door, with the authority a duchess might have used, and as they crossed the threshold, Roy and Gervaise removed their hats to permit their ingress.

"Gentlemen always do me reverence. It is right. Who can interpret the music of the waters, or demand of the planets their purposes,

certainly is worthy the respect of both men and gods."

Her ready utterance, her deep-toned, dramatic language, were in her favor.

She produced a glass of clear water, and began peering eagerly into its transparent depths.

Then, after a close survey, she shook her head.

"There are clouds, darkness, winds, storm, and a wrecked ship."

She looked suddenly up at Barbara, and beckoned her to draw nearer.

"It is all there," as she touched the glass. "I see it as plainly as you see the veins on that dainty hand. There is a lover; there is a sweetheart; a wife and a husband. I see wrath and anger; I hear deceitful voices and a lying tongue. I see the deceiver betrayed, and the proud brought low. It is dreadful, dreadful! Oh, the anguish, the weeping, the dying! And it is of *you*, beautiful woman! *you*, whose love brings a blight, whose vows end in a curse!"

Barbara's eyes had a deadly glitter in their brightness, and as the woman's voice died away to a low, crooning murmur as she repeated over and over—"a curse! a curse!" Her cheeks grew as pale as snow, and she snatched her hand from the woman's grasp.

"You wicked, slandering old witch! you vile morbid hag! How *dare* you, before these gentlemen, repeat your Satanic inventions? How *dare* you, I say?"

Barbara glared in the old woman's eyes like a very fury.

"Barbara, never mind. We do not care at all for what she says. Did we not agree to enjoy the sport, and let any unpleasantness pass? Don't, Barbara, *don't* look so."

Blanche laid her hand on her arm.

The fortune-teller's face suddenly grew luminous again, and almost reverently she touched Blanche's floating golden hair.

"Sweet-faced and gazelle-eyed. Oh, the heart aches; yon thunder-browed one will curse you! Oh, the tears you must weep, till you're drowned in them! But there comes another—he of the tender heart, who, once torn and hurt, as you must be, will know how to offer the balm that will heal. He will strengthen and sustain."

Blanche looked brightly over at De Laurian, whose eyes sent back a dart of love.

She never dreamed the fortune-teller referred to any one but him.

Roy was watching the two, and as he noted the messages telegraphed between them, he knew it was a verity, De Laurian's love for Blanche Chetwynd.

The old woman suddenly threw the water through the door.

"I will see no more. I will tell no more. My eyes are blind; my heart curdles at the scenes. I will take no money—it would pollute my fingers. Go, all of you, and remember the old fortune-teller's last words—'BEWARE!'"

CHAPTER X.

THE TEMPTER AND TEMPTED.

If Barbara had anticipated the surprise her announcement would cause, she more than realized her expectations.

"Barbara, what can possess you? It is such a perfectly wild idea, that of your accepting at once an invitation from a schoolmate you have not seen for years."

Mr. Chetwynd seemed quite displeased about it, and even frowned when Barbara displayed her letter, and very matter-of-factly declared her intention of accepting it.

"Barbara, either you or Nellie Bruges is crazy. Why, she never seemed so great a friend of yours at college."

Blanche spoke in unfeigned surprise, to which Barbara answered carelessly:

"Nor will we be now, I think. I hope you're not jealous, Blanche?"

After that Blanche said nothing further.

"Perhaps, as you aver, it is a foolish whim," Barbara said quietly, to Mr. Chetwynd. "But I should enjoy the tour, and the change of life, for a while at least."

Her determined manner carried the day, as usual; and before night her half-dozen trunks stood in the hall, packed, strapped and ticketed.

Alone of the party, Roy Davenal had expressed no opinion; but the expression of his eyes had haunted Barbara all that briny day.

On this, the last evening at Chetwynd Chase, she had attired herself in her most becoming toilet, a pale lavender silk. Her splendid hair, so lustrous in its dark brown beauty, was drawn from her forehead *a la Pompadour*, and then allowed to fall over her shoulders and far below her waist, with only a narrow fillet of ribbon for ornament.

She was beautiful beyond expression, and when her mirror had returned her faithful reflection, she had gone from it with a new light in her already sparkling eyes: the conscious power that beauty always gives a woman.

Blanche and her parents were still in their rooms at their toilets, and De Laurian had not yet ridden to Chetwynd Chase; so that Barbara was alone as she descended the stairs and went out upon the starlit piazza.

It was a most perfect night; warm for the month—November, and strangely still, with a reddish gold haze intervening between the slender gold crescent that was hiding, now and then, among the feathery *cumuli*, and Barbara, as she leaned against the honeysuckle trellis, could not but feel the influence of the time and scene.

And what a time it was! She, a wife, unacknowledged by a soul save her husband; and not only that, but the recognized promised bride of another!

Truly there was little wonder that her breath came quicker, and her heart beat faster, when she heard footsteps approaching, and knew it was her lover coming for the parting interview. She saw Roy Davenal coming up the avenue, and a cold, steely expression gathered in her eyes.

"Shall I mislead him yet this once? Shall I probe him, to see if the blow will be so *very* hard when it comes? He must not know my double game until every one knows."

She decided hastily as Roy came quickly up the steps, and with passionate ardor, took both her hands in his own.

"Barbara, my darling, *why* are you going from me? *Won't* you stay? Is it because I am here that you are anxious to be away? If so, let me go, and not you."

His voice was thrillingly entreating, and he spoke hurriedly, impulsively, as one who has much at stake. Barbara saw his meaning, divined the suspicion he entertained, and resolved to use it to her own advantage. With a cold little laugh she struggled to withdraw her hands, but he detained them.

"Mr. Davenal, since you will not release me, of course your prisoner has no choice but to remain, however unpleasant the situation."

In an instant he let her hands fall.

"What, Barbara! you cease calling me Roy? You affirm it is distasteful to you to be near me? Barbara, tell me what I have done to offend you?"

"It is of no consequence, in the least degree, that I need repeat it."

She spoke indifferently as she toyed with a spray of the honeysuckle.

Roy's eager eyes were on her impassive face, and the look of distress on his own was pitiful to behold.

Just then Barbara looked up, and their eyes met. She started at the sight of him.

"I will tell you then that you have surmised correctly in supposing that your presence drives me from my home. At first, your visit was a source of ceaseless joy to me; afterward, when I discovered it was not myself, after all, that was the motive that brought you, I concluded to abandon the field to my fair rival, and dispose of myself as best I could."

"What! you accuse me of favoring a rival of yours, Barbara? You tell me another purpose than seeing you brought me all the way from St. Louis here? Oh, Barbara, what demon has been poisoning your heart against me?"

His voice was freighted with anguish, and Barbara saw him throw his hat on the floor, and pass his hands over his forehead again and again, as if to quell some tumultuous pain.

A momentary remorseful pang shot through Barbara's heart.

"Poor fellow, he deserves better than this at my hands."

It was a passing thought, but Davenal was benefited thereby, for, almost involuntarily, she uttered his name, "Roy!"

It was spoken in a low, tender tone, and a sudden happiness lighted his features.

"Barbara, darling, you will take back those cruel words? You'll tell me you have other reasons for going away? You'll tell me once more you love me?"

He was so impulsive, so ardent, in his great, strong love for this woman, and she smiled at his impetuous way.

A smile usually opens the door to a kind word, and it was not the reverse in this case.

"Roy, I admit I am hardly treating you fairly. I *did* say I thought you cared more for Blanche Chetwynd, than for me—"

He snapped a twig of honeysuckle.

"I don't care *that* for her! and you know it, Barbara!"

"You are not over complimentary to your host's daughter, Roy."

"As a lady, she will always command my esteem and honor: as a friend, my best friendship. But as a wife, Barbara, she is a nonentity, compared with *you*. Why, if I had married her, and then met you, I'd not like to say what would have been the consequences. Barbara, *don't* you know how I love you?"

He laid his hand on her shoulder and looked down into her eyes.

"You'd not commit suicide, or sue for a divorce, would you?" she laughed, but a cold shiver thrilled her as she hastily framed another question. "Suppose the case reversed. Suppose *I* were married, to Mr. De Laurian, for instance, what would you do?"

As she waited his answer, a sickening dread she could not help, crept numbly over her, that was not alleviated when he spoke, in a painfully shrill whisper:

"I'd not hesitate a moment. When a man loves as I love *you*, Barbara Lester, he would never permit another to cross his path with impunity. Do you care for Gervaise De Laurian?"

The question came so suddenly it almost took her breath; she shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"I care for Gervaise De Laurian, and engaged to you? Roy, that is absurd."

He did not smile in response.

"You have gracefully evaded the question. Do you care for him *at all*? Yes or no?"

He regarded her with a scrutiny that took all her indomitable will to meet. Then, with her matchless effrontery, she answered:

"I do not."

A sigh of relief escaped her as he accepted the deliberate lie.

"I thought perhaps you did," rejoined Roy, caressing her cold fingers. "I judged from your coolness toward me, and by the way you just now used his name."

Barbara trembled as she realized the danger her false lips had averted.

"I am going in, Roy; it is getting chilly. Are you coming?"

She paused on the threshold and looked over her shoulder. Roy thought he had never seen her so passing fair.

"Yes, my dearest one! wherever you go, I follow, even to the death!"

Like a funeral knell those words rung in her ears, and, despite her efforts to forget them, they haunted her for weeks and weeks.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WAY MEN PLOT.

WITHIN the lighted library, Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd, Blanche and Gervaise De Laurian were sitting, and Barbara wondered, when she exchanged greetings with him, if he had heard any of her conversation with Roy Davenal.

In social converse the hours of that last evening at Chetwynd Chase passed away, and, when it was eleven by the cuckoo clock, the party broke up and sought their rooms.

Barbara had no chance to see her husband alone that evening, but, at parting, when he took her hand and bade her good-night, he left a note in her palm.

The lights had all been extinguished at the Chase, save in Barbara's elegant apartment, where, in her white night-dress, she opened the paper with almost idolatrous affection. It read:

"MY SWEET WIFE:—"

"Foreseeing the difficulty there would be of obtaining a private interview, I thought it best to write a few last arrangements in case I do not find an opportunity in the morning."

"First, then, *my wife*, use the inclosed cheque, which you will present at the bank designated—the address is written in one corner, you see—in New York. I think the amount it represents will suffice until I join you two days after. Think of that, my beautiful darling; I shall come to you in two days never again to leave you. We'll be happy, Barbara, won't we?"

"But to the arrangements. When you reach New York, you will only wait long enough to attend to the cheque, and go direct on to Philadelphia in the 2:45 train; engage a suite of rooms at the 'Continental' or 'Girard'—they are directly opposite each other—whichever you prefer. Then, on Thursday, I will come, my own, and together plan for our future tour."

"I may have no opportunity, as I said, of so much as a word in the morning; and that is why I desire to renew my assurances of love now; you are so dear, so unspeakably precious to me, my own, my own. How shall I hasten the time when we meet? I wish, my Barbara, forever, you to greet."

"YOUR LOVING HUSBAND."

Barbara read and reread this letter, so dear to her; then, when she had extinguished the light, she lay down to sleep, with the precious note against her red cheek.

In the next room, where the odor of night-sweets was wafted in, Blanche Chetwynd was kneeling by the wide-open window, her sweet face all alight with love and hope.

She was too wakeful to think of retiring. The evening had been a most enjoyable one to her, and, though she regretted losing the society of Barbara, still the love of De Laurian was an all-powerful comforter.

He had bidden her a most tender good-night when Barbara had re-entered the house, supposing Blanche had preceded her up-stairs. On the starlighted veranda they had stood, he holding her hand in lover-like familiarity.

"My little pure pearl, wait until the house is quiet again; wait until Barbara has gone. Then, dearest, the long rides we shall take alone, the delightful walks, the charming *tete-a-tetes* with no fear of being rudely interrupted; and best of all, my little one, the wedding at Christmas."

These ardent words were sounding through Blanche's ears yet, and, in the solemn stillness of the midnight hour, she communed with her innocent self.

"Poor Barbara!" she whispered, softly and pityingly. "She is so proud, so cold, that I fear she will never condescend to love or be loved. If she only knew how blessed it is to have somebody care so much for her as Gervaise does for me, she would be so thankful and contented. As it is, her unrest arises from an unoccupied heart, for I am more than ever sure that she doesn't care for Roy Davenal. How strange it is Barbara never cared for Gervaise! They are both so grand, so proud! But, if she was to! if he was ever to love her and not me! what would I do?"

A sudden sharp look of pain shot across her face, but a merry little smile chased it away.

"How silly I am! and we to be married on Christmas!"

A blush overspread her face as she let fall the lace curtains, and sought her pillow, so trusting, so happy.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHAIN OF GOLD.

THE earliest birds were caroling a matin to the sunrise when the Chetwynd carriage drove up to the side entrance, and received its load of trunks. Even at this eleventh hour, Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd were protesting against Barbara's going; and Blanche, standing by De Laurian, who had galloped down in the gray dawn from Paterson to bid her adieu, entreated her, yet quite coolly, to reconsider the matter, and postpone the visit, if not give it up.

De Laurian, to all eyes except her own, evinced a gentlemanly regret at losing her society, and begged she would remember him as a friend and well-wisher; then, when she laughed and assured him she would do so, suddenly grew painfully confused—a rare misfortune to occur to her—when De Laurian banteringly told her he'd wager a set of opals against the white rosebud she held, that if kind Fortune favored them with another meeting, they would both be married. Blanche felt the pressure of his arm on her hand, and a flush dyed her face.

Roy Davenal saw it, and drew a long breath of relief that De Laurian and Blanche were so well in for it.

In a second Barbara's self-command returned. "Doubtless, Mr. De Laurian, your predictions will prove correct. And now, as I have bidden you all a personal adieu, I will be off."

She went down the steps and entered the carriage in her own peculiar independent way, and every eye followed her with admiration.

Truly, Gervaise De Laurian's heart beat proudly as he gazed on her, so radiant, so stylish in her traveling suit of Antwerp silk, and her dainty hat with a Bird of Paradise floating like a ray of sunlight over her dark hair.

"Barbara, have you no word for me? I am sure there need be no further secrecy in this matter. Our friends all know of our engagement; why need you leave me without a parting word?"

Roy spoke a little bitterly.

Barbara leaned back among the cushions, her face expressive of her displeasure. Why had he acted so foolishly? what made him speak in such a manner? What reply should she make? something that would satisfy Roy, and not dissatisfy De Laurian.

Her ready woman's wit came to the rescue. "Surely I need not, Roy. I should think, however, you had studied womankind so thoroughly that you'd know by this time that we never express our private thoughts for the benefit of others."

Roy had full view of her face as she spoke, while no one else had; and, as she concluded, she smiled upon him, and kissed the tip of her fingers to him, at the same time making a menacing little gesture toward the rest of the party.

De Laurian had laughed outright when Barbara spoke.

"Good for you, Miss Lester. Davenal, you acknowledge yourself worsted by that broadside?"

Roy could afford to laugh after that look of Barbara's.

"I'll repay you with interest some day."

Mr. Chetwynd stepped up to the carriage.

"You have no more time to spare, Barbara; Oliver will have to drive fast to catch the Newburg express at Paterson. Take care of yourself, and write soon."

With a beaming smile, Barbara nodded them adieu, and, as the carriage turned a curve, she waved her handkerchief toward them.

With a sigh, Mrs. Chetwynd turned to re-enter the house; had she known all that would occur before she again looked on willful, beautiful Barbara, the sigh would have been a shriek.

"Such an idea! and yet, in its impulsiveness so like poor Barbara herself."

Mrs. Chetwynd remarked it to De Laurian as they entered the house.

"I think it very likely she will return as suddenly as she left. You will miss her very much, doubtless."

"Indeed we will; she seems as near and dear to me as though she were one of my own blood."

De Laurian started, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Is she not a relative? I always supposed her a cousin, at least."

"Oh, no; there does not exist the slightest tie of relationship. She was a sort of waif, who was left to our kindness when only a babe of very tender age. She and Blanche were just of a size and age then, although Barbara has grown the taller since."

De Laurian listened with eager interest.

"And you have not the remotest idea who or what she is? There was no clue to her parentage?"

"Yes, a slight one, that only seemed to lighten our interest in her. It is a broken chain, of Florentine gold, joined by an opal stone, that is severed in the middle. On the under side of the jewel is half a letter 'D' and a complete one joining, thus."

She drew with her pencil on a card two letter D's, lapped and joined.

"We suppose the missing half of the stone to supply the rest of the letter, and another also, to correspond with the half I have; thus making, when complete, three D's, that doubtless represent her parents' initials, while to us they suggest the terrible 'curse'—Dishonor, Desertion, Death, which my poor Blanche seems to inherit as her fatal birthright."

A dense shadow darkened Mrs. Chetwynd's face, but she strove to throw it off.

"We named her 'Barbara Lester' because on her little robe that name was written."

De Laurian was listening with intensest animation to this story of his wife's early life.

"Blanche, bring the necklace for Mr. De Laurian to see; it is of rare workmanship."

As Blanche obeyed, Roy Davenal joined Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd.

"Now that Barbara has gone, sir, I candidly admit the charm at Chetwynd Chase is broken. I came from the West purposely to see her, and, in consequence of her sudden flitting, have not accomplished my object."

"Mr. Chetwynd, it must be useless for me to say I love Barbara. I have loved her for years. I desire to make her my wife. Can it be so?"

He looked every inch the noble lover as he stood there and proudly asked this favor at the hands of the courtly old gentleman.

"As you say, Mr. Davenal, it seems almost superfluous to tell us this, so patent has it been for so long a time. I will not stand in your way, believing you to be a man well worthy the hand of my foster-child. She will give you her answer, and, whatever it is, I will ratify it."

Roy bowed; he had not much fear of Barbara's withholding her consent.

"Then at Christmas, if she has returned, I may claim her?"

"So far as I am concerned, most certainly."

Roy's face grew luminous with the great happiness, and he warmly grasped Mr. Chetwynd's hand, and offered his thanks, and in return received both his and Mrs. Chetwynd's congratulations.

Then he went across the room to De Laurian, who, his head leaning carelessly against the

window, had heard with secret triumph, the arrangements to give his wife's hand to this lover.

"You will offer me joy? and a long life to love and cherish her, De Laurian?"

"Most heartily I wish you all you will wish me and my bride. Allow me to announce the future Mrs. Gervaise De Laurian."

Blanche had at that moment entered with the chain.

Roy took her hand and touched it to his lips.

"Accept my most fervent congratulations, Blanche. And, as your present is bright and sunny, may your future be fairer and more radiant. De Laurian, you're a fortunate fellow."

"As well as yourself, sir."

They shook hands warmly, and then Mrs. Chetwynd touched Davenal on the shoulder.

"When you write to Barbara, Mr. Davenal, please do not intimate the engagement between Blanche and Mr. De Laurian. You'll remember? It will be a most delightful surprise when she returns to her own wedding to find there will be another."

"I will not mention it. And now, my friends, permit me to wish you good-by. With your permission, Mr. Chetwynd, I will take one of your horses, to be sent directly home."

"There is no need of that, Mr. Davenal. One of the men can ride over after you and bring back Fire-fly—you'd better take Fire-fly."

"I may possibly catch the train Barbara took, —I will try for it, at least."

He bade them good-by, gave a hasty order for his trunk to be expressed through to St. Louis, and galloped away, followed by De Laurian's dark eyes, that combined a mingled look of mocking triumph and derisive pity.

"This is Barbara's chain, Mr. De Laurian."

Mrs. Chetwynd handed him the necklace; he took it to the window to examine it.

"What does Barbara herself think of it?" he asked.

"She does not say; I know she would like to keep it in her own possession, but I think it should remain in my keeping."

"Undoubtedly; and you may one day discover she is a duchess in disguise."

Blanche wondered at the fire in her lover's eyes as he critically surveyed the toy.

A sudden resolve had entered De Laurian's brain, and, as usual, he acted immediately in accordance with it. This chain was a link that bound Barbara and—who was at the other end? Was the necklace a stolen bauble, or really the remnant of former riches on her parents' part? At all events, it must be his; it *should* be his.

With a sudden start of alarm, he sprung from the window.

"Mr. Chetwynd—Madame! what have I, in my awkwardness, done! I have dropped the chain outside."

He hastened to the door, and to the lawn, where, under the window, was an iron grating opening into the underground reservoir from whence came the water in the fountain.

In consternation Mrs. Chetwynd followed him.

"What can I do to replace it? Any thing you can suggest shall be done."

De Laurian's face was troubled and anxious as he peered through the grating, then at the faces of Mrs. Chetwynd and her husband.

"Do not be so grieved. Accidents can not always be avoided."

Her ladylike manner assured him he was pardoned for his carelessness, and they went back to the drawing-room, while De Laurian, bidding them adieu, returned home. Out of sight of Chetwynd Chase, he checked the speed of his horse, and with a smile no language can describe, drew from his coat-sleeve the broken chain of Florentine gold!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DREAD BLOW.

TRUE to his word, De Laurian did not lose any time in making his "trip on business, that would necessarily detain him a couple of months at least."

So he explained to trusting Blanche, as they bade adieu on the moonlight piazza at Chetwynd Chase.

"But I will be back in good season for the wedding at Christmas, my little betrothed, and then for a life of love with my own Blanche."

And she, nothing doubting, only grieved at the inevitable separation, and watched him, with tearful, yet happy eyes, as he went forth on his mission of direct wrong.

He joined Barbara at the Continental Hotel, and, fearful lest his plans would be thwarted by the chance recognition of any traveling friends,

suggested a quiet honeymoon in some out-of-the-way place, where, as he told her, with thrilling love-words, he could have her all to himself for the few short weeks he could remain with her before he returned to New Jersey to arrange for their home.

Barbara seemed almost like another person, all those bright, blissful days; she had thrown care and fear to the winds, thankful that Gervaise was her husband, trusting implicitly to him, and forgetting the tormenting jealousies that had torn her so, in past days. She seemed to live a year in those seven weeks, so crowded were they with concentrated content and happiness; it seemed ages since she had seen the Chetwynds—poor, guileless Blanche—and Roy Davenal. Somehow, whenever she thought of Roy, it hurt her; she was grown so happy and peaceful herself, because of her husband's love and devotion, that she pitied Davenal with a tenderness very foreign to her passionate nature.

Gervaise and she would sit for hours and talk over their romance, and then, with all the ardor of her soul, she would tell him how she loved him.

And so the days wore away, and almost before she knew it, the time had come for De Laurian to go back and arrange for her return.

She earnestly pleaded to go with him in the first place, but with thoughtful consideration he insisted on her remaining until he had broken the news to the Chetwynds and arranged for her a befitting home-coming.

And so, transformed by love into the true, trusting wife, she gracefully consented, and thanked him for his kindness. And then he bade her adieu—only a short adieu, he said, as he kissed her again and again; then he left her.

That afternoon, after he was gone, and she sat alone by the window, she wondered why it was she felt so strangely, not physically, for she never had been in better health. But there weighed on her mind some weight; some cold, leaden pressure that would not be raised, and that she attributed, at length, to nervousness, superinduced by her natural regret at her lover-husband's absence.

Little did she know what that oppression was the shadow of, or what was the substance that cast that shadow!

She never dreamed, in her trusting love, that he who was all in all to her was a man of blacker soul than any man but a very devil could be; how should she know?

So she waited for his return—and then, one bright, wintry day, the one before the sacred, beautiful Christmas, the horrible blow came, that transformed Barbara De Laurian—we never shall call her that again—into the woman whose presence brought a blight, whose hands scattered seeds of Dead Sea fruit, whose heart and brain were the heart and brain of a Medusa—that blasted whatsoever they would.

There came a letter and this is what it told her, word for word:

"Barbara, the hour has come when it is meet that you should know all, when it is my disagreeable duty, my painful duty, to tell you a truth that I know will bring curses on my head for time and eternity from you. I deserve them; I will say that; I accept them as the punishment of my wickedness, and do not add insult to injury by asking or expecting you to forgive what I full well know is unpardonable.

"Barbara, this letter will reach you, I intend, by the five o'clock mail on Christmas afternoon; at noon of Christmas Day I shall be married to Blanche Chetwynd, at Chetwynd Chase, with the full and cordial approval of her parents.

"You start, and exclaim in passionate bewilderment, I know; I answer by solemnly swearing that Blanche De Laurian will be my lawful wife, because—God pity you, Barbara, you are not, and never were.

"You understand how I have sinned? You know now that I permitted you to believe valid a ceremony performed by a college student who consented, with as wicked a heart as I, to the infamous deed? I will not attempt to gloss over my conduct; I will not remind you how I loved you; you know that, Barbara; neither will I harshly remind you that it will be better for you to conceal this little episode in your life, for your own sake. Blanche shall never be annoyed by you, nor can I permit that any trouble shall come to my wife's family therefrom; you know me, Barbara, and that I will not be trifled with.

"Again, you remember the broken opal stone, and the chain of Florentine gold we have talked about and so often examined? I shall retain it in my possession, and if ever I find you are working me evil I shall send it to you as a token of vengeance.

"And now, Barbara, beautiful, enchanting Barbara, I bid you adieu, never expecting our paths will cross again, but certainly intending if they do, that we meet as friends, at least.

"GERVAISE DE LAURIAN."

Rigid as a marble statue she had sat, and read the hellish letter through, from date to super-

scription, her fingers clenching the paper with a grip of iron, her eyes lurid and tearless.

Then, with almost a snap, so suddenly did the tense muscles relax, her hands fell lifeless at her side; a quick, choking sob struggled for vent, and then came a torrent of hot, heart-wrung tears.

She was a woman, with a woman's keen capability of suffering, even in proportion as she had loved.

Like a scorching simoom the storm of grief, horror and despair burst over her, withering her heart, inflaming her soul, and leaving the soil of her principles barren and waste.

"Lost!—lost! ruined, disgraced, deserted, unloved—and all, all by HIM! Trampled on and then carelessly set aside by him whom I worshiped as men never worshiped their God! Gervaise!—Gervaise! can it be true? have you given me up?"

A moan of heartrending agony followed her words, and she clasped her hands over her beating bosom, while her head fell forward in the abandonment of her awful grief.

"For you, for you, my Gervaise, my lost love, would I have dared all things—all, save this—this infamy, that, in all my wildest visions of love, I never dreamed of! But you no longer love ME, whom you have betrayed, then spurned and scorned! You have given the love for which I would have bartered my soul, for which I did, all unconscious, sell my honor, to another! I might have borne even this disgrace, Gervaise, had you been true! But to another—to Blanche Chetwynd!"

Her soliloquy was bringing a defiant glare to her eyes; the olden-time glare, a hundred-fold intensified, that had lighted her eyes in the days when she had not wholly trusted her lover; and she snatched the ring from her icy fingers—that she had regarded as her wedding-ring—with a gesture of agonized rage.

Suddenly her mood changed, and, with yearning cries of love and tenderness, she pressed it passionately to her lips. Over and over again she kissed the bright jewels, her tears dropping on their gleaming surfaces.

"The delicious dreams I have indulged in over his betrothal gem; the blissful hopes I have enjoyed—oh, Gervaise! Gervaise! it is so hard! it is so cruel! I will die, all for love and betrayal—love for you, Gervaise De Laurian!"

With a low wail of pain, she drooped her head on her breast, clutching the diamond-ring in a tight grip.

Quietly, motionless she sat; for an hour she neither moved nor murmured; her heart was accustoming itself to this sudden blow; she was slowly numbing herself to her inevitable destiny. Slowly, surely, Barbara Lester was crushing, with almost superhuman power, the love of her trampled heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BURIED LOVE.

PRESENTLY she arose, and walked tottering across the room to the pier-glass.

She smiled scornfully at the reflection, as she addressed it.

"Barbara Lester, do you know who you are? and what you are? and what your business from to-day is?"

She paused, and a tremor passed over her. She grew paler, and reeled a step, then stood, strong and firm again.

"That was the last, dying pang! I have buried my love for Gervaise De Laurian—but I have buried it alive."

Her chest heaved irregularly, but only for a moment; then every trace of her agitation had vanished.

"There, Barbara Lester, wronged, disgraced, contemptible though you know you are, you are strong again. Strong, with a strength born of weakness, proud, with a pride following humility! You will never quiver when you hear his name; you will never falter when you speak it, or blush when you speak to him!"

She peered in her beautiful dark eyes, and her lips parted in a gloomy smile.

"Love was sweet, Barbara Lester, was it not? Beauty is pleasant to possess, but there remains something sweeter than the one, and better than the other. REVENGE! written in letters by a pen steeped in the blood of a bruised heart and embittered by the gall of a tarnished honor! Never shall you rest from your toils, Barbara Lester; never shall you find lasting repose for your burning head and your weary feet till your task be finished."

She raised her hand, and then laughed, to see the gleam of the diamonds.

"He gave it for a love-pledge, but he will rue

the day. By that ring, I swear to crush every hope, blight every joy, blast every comfort he dare imagine!"

A very avenging spirit she looked; superbly beautiful, calmly defiant. The wave of passion had passed on its way, leaving her resigned, but desperate.

There was a gleam in her black eyes, that augured trouble to some one, and a pitiless smile curving her red lips, that was ominous.

And she did not belie her looks. She intended a revenge from the depths of her heart; and from the moment she dated the living burial of her love for Gervaise De Laurian, she dated her first step on her self-appointed mission.

And a terrible mission it was; only one that a woman, deceived, betrayed and crushed as she had been, could have attempted; and she unblenchingly went to work that very hour.

The fact of De Laurian's letter having arrived twenty-four hours sooner than he had intended or expected, was not overlooked by Barbara; it was an intervention in her favor, in that it gave her ample time to perform the journey between Philadelphia and Chetwynd Chase before the marriage ceremony occurred.

She packed her trunks with a precision that denoted the high state of nervous excitement she was in; had them labeled "Miss Lester, Pater-son, N. J.," (the Chase carriage would meet her there, if telegraphed), sent to the Kensington depot, and a through ticket to New York brought back.

She had no idea of forbidding the banns; she knew too well the utter nothingness of the claim she had upon Gervaise De Laurian, but she *did* know what to do about it, and the first thing to do was to return to Chetwynd Chase in time for the wedding, and meet the man who had wronged her with a stolid indifference that should mystify him.

She dressed herself, with excellent taste, in a pearl-gray silk walking suit, and called a carriage to take her to the Kensington depot, first paying her bills in a queenly, quiet way.

As she took her seat in the car, already nearly full, a gentleman addressed her.

"Madam, will this seat be occupied?"

With a thrill of anguish and surprise, she turned to recognize—Roy Davenal.

"Barbara! can it be possible? Oh, I am too thankful I have found you. I have been searching for you this two months."

His face was all aglow with delight, and he caressed her hand as warmly as he dared.

"Where have you been, my darling? I went as direct to your friend's house as I could go, and she was as astonished to think I would find you there as I was not to find you. Where have you been, my dearest?"

It was like stabbing a wound afresh for Barbara to listen to this man's honest, loving words. He called her "darling" and "dearest," this man who believed her to be his betrothed, whom she had grossly deceived, and who, if he had known all, would have recoiled from her side in horror.

So he had discovered that she had not been to her friend's; well, she instantly decided upon two points; first, to allow him to still regard her his betrothed, and to confess, in the half-candid, wholly willful way she had—hundreds of years ago it seemed—that she had never intended going to her friend in the West, but offered it as an excuse for a long jaunt she wanted to enjoy alone.

And so she told him, in her sweet, bright way, this strong-hearted woman who was traveling on, further than the cars could take her to wreak her revenge.

Roy Davenal was so glad to see her: he had been so torn with fearful doubts since Mrs. Chetwynd had promised him Barbara's hand for Christmas; now all clouds were lifted as by magic, and he reveled in the beauty of her presence.

Naturally, the wedding of De Laurian and Blanche was discussed; and Barbara spoke of it, and the bridegroom-elect, without a tremor of tone.

But when Roy told her of what had been his hopes for the coming day, and urged her with all a lover's sophistries, to consent to be married, a fierce horrid pain shot through her heart, the existence of which she barely contrived, by her superhuman will, to conceal from Davenal's eyes. It was unexpected, she plead, very gently—for she could pity him, now, since she herself so needed strongest sympathy—would not Roy postpone it till later?

And in the bitter, anguishful memories that flooded her eyes, Roy Davenal read only pleading entreaty. He was obliged to yield a reluctant consent, and then Barbara grew silent as

the train sped swiftly on, carrying her nearer and nearer—to what?

At Jersey City they took an accommodation train that made all the stops on the Erie road, between the city and Paterson, so that while her trunks were carried on to Paterson, she and Roy left the train at Passaic, and walked to Chetwynd Chase. It was a brilliant night, and at nine o'clock the moon was at its full; they walked rapidly along over the frozen, snow-packed road, and Barbara, wrapped closely in her furs though she was, shivered as though she were dying as they hurried past the abbey ruins.

Ah! The agony was not dead, if the proud will had buried it alive.

Chetwynd Chase was all alive with lights that threw their radiance far out on the snow-bound landscape, and Barbara wondered if it meant a welcome for her?

Somehow that still, mild night, with its myriads of twinkling stars, made her heart ache bitterly; such a "home-coming," after the one she and De Laurian had pictured time and again—now she saw with what consummate skill it had been done, and she hated him for the moment.

They could hear voices now and then, laughing voices, and then—a quick, wild cry burst from Barbara's lips. De Laurian and Blanche passed by the window on the inside.

Blanche leaned on his arm, and he was bending his head with that stately grace that became him so well.

After that quick, wild cry, half-stifled though it was, Barbara knew she could meet him unmoved, and as she rung the door-bell long and loudly, a flush of conscious pride rose to her face.

The footman admitted her, and she gracefully walked into the drawing-room, among the guests, and went up to Blanche, as she stood leaning on Gervaise De Laurian's arm.

"Blanche, I'm home again, and just in time. Sir, I offer my congratulations." She bowed to De Laurian, who, for the moment, was transfixed with horror; then she went coolly on, and greeted Mrs. Chetwynd, who was eagerly talking to Roy.

"My dear child! and such a goose-chase as you have been leading, Roy tells me. Well, let me go with you to your room, my dear, and see that you are rested for an hour or so, before you come down again."

And that was what this woman had looked forward to in her rosiest dreams: this was Barbara's "home-coming!"

CHAPTER XV.

DRAWING THE NET CLOSER.

PASSING fair was Blanche Chetwynd on the morning of her bridal day, with her sweet brown eyes alight with tender winsomeness, and a faint pink tinge on her white complexion.

The hour was eleven, and she had been dressed only a few minutes when her parents and Barbara entered her room to exchange those affectionate greetings that seldom occur more than once in a lifetime.

Her bridal costume was superlatively elegant, that well became the rank and wealth of the Chetwynds no less than the personal grace of the bride, to whom the cloud-like folds of Mechlin lace over heavy white silk lent new and sylph-like beauty.

The Chetwynd pearls crowned her proud little head, and lay in cool purity around her throat and wrists, and depended from her ears.

She had seated herself on a capacious damask sofa when her parents and Barbara had entered.

"Blanche, dear child, this will be the last levee Miss Chetwynd will ever hold. The next will be given by Mrs. De Laurian."

Mrs. Chetwynd spoke tenderly, and the tears sprang to Blanche's eyes.

"What, tears? Not on your wedding-day, Blanche? Surely the bride of Gervaise De Laurian should be the happiest woman living."

It was the father who spoke so cheerily and merrily, as he gently caressed his daughter's white hand.

"Unless they be tears of joy."

Barbara's musical voice pronounced the words, and Blanche turned toward her, as Barbara went on.

"Because, my dear, the time may come when tears of anguish will be shed. Why, then, rebuke those of joy?"

Blanche's answer came in quick, startled tones.

"Barbara, do not mention such a thing! You send a cold shiver to my very heart."

She looked entreatingly at Barbara's dark, handsome face.

She laughed in a low, melodious laugh, that

implied plainly distrust as to Blanche's future happiness.

"I'm a little surprised, Barbara, that you should introduce so gloomy a topic on this occasion. Let the child be treated to all that is beautiful, pleasant and hopeful."

Mr. Chetwynd turned gravely toward Barbara.

Again the same satirical laugh issued from her coral lips, but a rap at the door, immediately followed by the intruder, prevented a remark. With a blush of delight, Blanche saw De Laurian dressed for the ceremony. He went straight up to her and affectionately kissed her, while she retained the hand he had extended, and caressed it fondly, the while looking eagerly up in his handsome face.

And Barbara smiled as she gazed on them.

"We were bidding adieu to Miss Blanche Chetwynd," Mr. Chetwynd said to Gervaise, who bowed gayly.

"Because she will be to me the dearest among women is no reason why you should love her less."

"Surely not," returned Mr. Chetwynd, "and yet you must never forget the peculiar dower she brings you—the mysterious, 'Curse,' that from to-day you must share equally with her."

"But I fear no old legend, Gervaise; do you?" Her sunny eyes would have inspired any one, and her gallant lover bowed an assent.

"Indeed I do not fear it, my Blanche."

"But it will come, Mr. De Laurian, in one form or another, depend upon it."

De Laurian turned haughtily to Barbara, who had spoken; not a vestige of surprise or fear on his face, that only wore an expression of cool sarcasm.

"Indeed, Miss Lester! But as you are not an oracle, we will not depend on any thing you may affirm."

Oh, that covert blow, and his eyes so guarded, his words so aptly chosen. But she was equal to him.

"I suppose you have heard it declared by persons more responsible than I that chickens and curses come home to roost? A wronged, betrayed woman, jealous of her honor, would never suffer her words to fall idly. Lady Constanza was such, I take it. Something of my style, was she not?"

She had looked De Laurian full in the eyes while she was speaking, her own face perfectly calm and under control; now she turned to Mrs. Chetwynd with the apparently careless inquiry.

"In *personnel*, I should think so; in character, I hope not."

A faint mocking smile flitted across De Laurian's lips that stung Barbara to the quick.

"He shall pay well for that," she declared, then spoke aloud again, in her sweetest voice.

"Mr. De Laurian, if I may venture to ask a boon at the hands of one from whom I should expect nothing, I would request from you to me a personal promise that you will sacredly keep the vows you will take upon you at the altar—to love and cherish Blanche as we, her family, have done."

In surprise they turned to Barbara, as she uttered the strange request.

Magnificent in her festal dress of jet-black velvet and glowing ribbons, she leaned with careless grace against a marble Ceres, who lifted aloft a sheaf of golden wheat, from whence flamed the light that illumined the apartment by night.

De Laurian bowed frigidly.

"At the altar, Miss Lester, I shall swear to cherish and protect her better than parent or sister ever could have done."

A defiant smile lighted his face.

"Doubtless, Mr. De Laurian, we all expect you to do that; still, we who are nearest and dearest to her now, would be pleased to hear that personal assurance. I wish it, Mr. De Laurian."

Her eyes were fixed intently on his face with a magnetic flame that could not but annoy and irritate him; but he bowed before her.

"Then, Miss Lester—"

But Mr. Chetwynd interrupted him.

"Why should you, Barbara, demand this strange request of Mr. De Laurian? If the idea strikes you as important, or simply pleasing, why not refer him to my wife or myself?"

Mr. Chetwynd's eyes were piercing vainly through Barbara's impassive countenance.

"Because, sir, who else beside the sister whose couch she has shared so many years, whose confidante she has been since her heart knew a secret; who else should demand and receive a promise?"

She looked around at them a moment, and

then again suffered, for a second, the bewildering light of her eyes to fall on De Laurian.

Mr. Chetwynd's face relaxed into a smile.

"Mr. De Laurian, it rests with you, now, to indulge so harmless a whim."

De Laurian shrugged his shoulders.

"I think the lady can wait until the ceremony—then she shall hear me swear 'till death do us part.'"

A shiver ran over Blanche's form as her lover uttered the words.

"It sounds so dismal, Gervaise; I verily believe I am a coward to-day."

She bravely forced a smile to her lips.

"Blanche, dear, it is my fault for having introduced the subject. But you'll forgive me?"

Barbara knelt before the girlish bride.

"Unreservedly, sister mine. I am ashamed of my own childish weakness."

She smiled lovingly on the upraised face, whose eyes of flashing darkness were veiled and subdued by the long, heavy lashes. She saw the smile that played over Barbara's red lips, but, in her own purity and innocence, did not read it aright.

She little dreamed that the beautiful woman at her feet had been transformed into a veritable demoness.

A silence fell on the little company that grew momentarily oppressive.

Barbara was the first to break it.

"Come; the guests will be disgusted at our tardiness—and I am sure that is Roy's step on the stair, seeking the recreant bridesmaid. Come, Blanche, take papa's arm. Mr. De Laurian, you will escort Mrs. Chetwynd? Roy—I'm ready."

Her fresh, girlish laugh, as she issued her playful words, broke the spell, and the bridal party went gayly down the stairs.

The minister began the impressive service, and a solemn silence fell on the assembly, while all eyes naturally watched the bride, none thinking, at that moment, of the stately, graceful bridesmaid.

But, Barbara stood there, proud and haughty, in all the consciousness of her regal beauty, and listened to the vows that Blanche so tremblingly promised.

A gleam of fearful fire flashed from her eyes as the officiating clergyman turned to Gervaise with the customary inquiry. A gleam of light that darkened rather than illumined; a nameless something, that seemed to scorch, annihilate; on her bloodless lips there curled a smile, that matched well the sardonic balefulness in her eyes.

Suddenly De Laurian glanced up at her, and met that awful smile, that terrible lurid light!

And then, too late, it came to him, like a revelation, that this wronged woman would cross his track, and that, too, in her own way and time.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE STEP MORE.

BELOW stairs, in the spacious drawing-room of Chetwynd Chase, the music was playing gayly and twinkling feet kept time in the merry dance.

Above, the guest and dressing chambers were deserted and silence reigned supreme.

The servants at the Chase, together with the maids of the visitors, were grouped outside the doors, and on the stairways, regarding the gay scene within.

In one of the apartments above the second flight of stairs a chance passer-by might have heard voices in low, cautious conversation.

The room was what was called the "observatory," a small, square apartment, whose walls were of thick plate-glass, whose furniture consisted of only two chairs, and a complete set of astronomical instruments.

Two persons occupied this room; one, Barbara Lester, who stood carelessly leaning against the large telescope, her brilliant eyes intently fixed on the fair, handsome face of Roy Davenal, that was lifted to her own with a smile of unutterable love.

"Roy," she said, tenderly, "this is kind of you not to forget me amid all the gayety of the bridal scene below."

"Forget you, Barbara? That I never can do. Do you not know it, and how more than thankful I am to have you back again once more?"

He extended his hand and lifted her round, bare arm to his lips.

"Do not stand, Barbara; sit beside me, and let me hear the sound of your words. Speak love words once more. It has been so long since, dearest."

He was looking yearningly up in her pale

face, and, as he spoke, he drew her face against his cheek.

"Tell me you love me as well to-day as ever?—yes, better than you ever did before. Is it not that for which you sent to me? Was not that your reason when you sent the message to meet you here?"

A bright smile of hope was on his lips, that were almost womanly in their fullness and beauty, yet entirely relieved from effeminacy by the defiant curve of the chin and the determined sternness of his dark blue eyes.

"Roy," she answered, in low, exquisite tones, and, as she heard the sound of her voice, she wondered if it were she or another she were listening to, "Roy, I *did* send for you for a most important purpose—a purpose that needs your assistance toward accomplishing the desired result, and whom no one beside yourself can do. You will help me, Roy, dear?"

She glanced keenly at him as he listened in respectful silence.

"To the utmost of my ability, Barbara, darling. What is it?"

A terrible smile swept over her face for a brief second before she replied.

"Roy, we both know that Blanche Chetwynd was married, not an hour since, to Gervaise De Laurian; the festivities are this moment celebrating; but, Roy, *Blanche shall NEVER be his wife!*"

She spoke the last words in a thrilling tone, that made him look suddenly, more intensely at her.

"What do you mean, Barbara. You mystify me."

Again, like a flash of fatal sheet-lightning, there swept that gleam from her eyes, and she bent nearer him to answer, until her breath flamed over his cheek.

"Roy Davenal, that man who has married Blanche, has offered me, your betrothed, the deepest of insults. Shall I, knowing who and what he is, permit him to become the husband of my only sister? Will you, my lover, aid me to avenge myself, and save Blanche from a life that will surely fulfill the curse of her race?"

A wrathful smile leaped into Roy's eyes, and he involuntarily sprung to his feet.

"Heavens, Barbara! De Laurian has dared insult you? Shall I shoot him down before his bride?"

"Oh, no," and she laughed lightly. "Don't be hasty—I am not, you see, and to act effectually we must both be calm. I have laid my plans out, Roy, deep as the sea, and all I require is your skillful hand."

He kissed her cold fingers as she extended them.

"You can depend upon me, to the furthest extent of your need. The villain—how dare he! Barbara, my beautiful betrothed, my blood boils when I think of it."

"I thank you, Roy, dearest."

Her siren voice thrilled his very heart, and he kissed again and again those rare red lips, so false, so fair.

"Barbara, I'd hardly have thought that of De Laurian. Unless *your* truthful lips had spoken it, not all the oaths that could be taken would have convinced me."

"You cannot be more surprised than I was, to learn his villainess. To me he was the soul of chivalry and honor—but I know better now."

Her lips closed tightly after those words, and Roy saw the shiver that went over her.

"And you think it will be right for me to save Blanche from him, Roy, darling?"

She caressed his cheek and smoothed his hair with her mesmeric fingers as she smiled in his eyes.

"Are you not always right, my Barbara? I cannot imagine you lending yourself to anything wrong, dearest, even if you are severe. Therefore, possessing such unbounded confidence in you, I say—do your own sweet will."

He looked away from her a second, to consult his watch, and the smile vanished from Barbara's face, the soft light from her eyes.

"I wish I could describe that countenance as it looked then, in all its baleful malignity, its bitterness, its despairing jealousy. It was a face that fascinated while it frightened, that bewildered while it startled. A face on whose brilliant features were written danger, revengeful hatred, and a fearful strength of will; and, perhaps, more than all, a proud consciousness of them all."

"I must leave you now, Barbara, dearest, or I will be missed. Kiss me before I go."

He wound his arms around her waist, and drew her head to his shoulder.

"Who could look in those eyes, Barbara, and refuse to obey the command your sweet lips uttered?"

"Then tell Mr. De Laurian, for me, that I await him in this room. Let no one hear the message, and do you entertain Blanche until he returns."

An excited flush rose to her cheeks as she spoke, low and rapidly.

"I will tell him at once, Barbara."

And she sat calmly down, to await the coming of the man who had wronged her beyond hope of reparation.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE POISONED MISSIVE.

SHE had not long to wait, for she had just seated herself in one of the chairs that she had drawn to the side of the room that commanded an extended view of the villages around and near Chetwynd Chase, when rapid steps that brought a cold sneer to her lips as she heard them, came nearer and nearer. A few minutes only had it been since the message had been delivered, in the coldest, haughtiest way, to Gervaise De Laurian, yet those few minutes had sufficed him to decide on the course he intended to pursue; that of cold indifference that would baffle her passionate accusations; a contemptuous disregard of the magnitude of his sin, and a mysterious threatening attitude if she assumed her prerogative to expose him.

So he smiled as he tapped at the door, with as much unconcern as though his valet was awaiting him, and not a wronged, jealous woman, whose all-absorbing love had turned to all-devouring hate, and who only awaited his entrance to wreak it upon him.

"Enter," he heard a chill, high voice say, and very nonchalantly he opened the door and bowed to her on the threshold.

"You desire to see me, Miss Lester?"

"I do, very naturally, Mr. De Laurian. You are not astonished?"

"It is needless for me to say I *am* astonished beyond expression; I supposed it was all over between you and I."

Her low, musical laugh started weird echoes in that lonely room.

"If you really thought so, Mr. De Laurian, be it my delightful task to correct the mistake; also to inform you that not a soul in Chetwynd Chase, save Royal Davenal, knows of your whereabouts."

De Laurian returned with interest her steady, burning glance; then a hateful smile parted his lips.

"Then be so good, Miss Lester, as to tell me for what I am wanted, as I am anxious to return to my charming bride."

She bowed her head in regal defiance at the words.

"Your bride, yes; but never—"

She suddenly checked the words.

"Sit down, Mr. De Laurian, while I talk with you, on an all-important subject that can scarcely fail to interest you."

She gracefully pushed him a chair, then glided to the door.

"I will close this," she said, lightly; we do not know who might pass by."

The heavy oaken door swung heavily to, and closed with a sharp snap that sent the blood curdling through De Laurian's veins.

Then she reseated herself opposite him, and, her figure arrayed in the ominous black velvet and blood-hued rubies, she seemed a very fiend of vengeance; and, as the cold smile faded from her lips, and a steely glitter gathered in her eyes, Gervaise De Laurian shivered to see her.

Deliberately she crossed her small, dark hands on her lap, and coolly surveyed every lineament of his face.

"Gervaise De Laurian," she said, in tones that were low, intense, and fearfully musical. "Gervaise De Laurian, perhaps you will tell me who I am?"

She paused, awaiting his answer.

"I will, certainly, strange and uncalled for though your question is."

"Then do so at once. Do you *know* who I am?"

There was a meaning in her query, and a meaning in the peculiar tones with which she put the words.

"You are Miss Barbara Lester, adopted daughter of Rexton Chetwynd, of Chetwynd Chase. Does the answer to so idle a question suit you?"

His lips curled scornfully as their eyes met, each so determined in their expression of patient revenge.

"Partly," she returned, quietly. "You speak truly when you say I am Rexton Chetwynd's adopted daughter; but, you lie, false-mouthed son of perdition, when you call me Barbara

Lester; you know the name that belongs to me; you know who I am—your wife, in the sight of God and honest men."

She had never raised her voice from the intensely deep key in which she began speaking, and now, when the hissing echo of her words died away, De Laurian realized that the smoldering fires would, ere long, leap forth.

"But I am more than that, Gervaise De Laurian; I am *an avenger*."

She fairly whispered the last words in his ear, as she leaned over to him, while her hot breath scorched his cheek.

"An avenger of whom, may I ask?"

He was uncommonly superb in this assumption of utter forgetfulness.

"You poor fool! do you not think I can read your mask as plainly as your viper's heart? But, since your *role* is to feign such blissful ignorance, be mine the task to explain that I shall avenge my wrongs—wrongs I received at your hands; that shall be forever nameless between us."

She toyed gracefully with her glowing ruby bracelet.

Then his face clouded over with that darkening frown she had so often seen before.

"Barbara—"

"Mrs. De Laurian, if you please, since I so kindly explained."

He threw up his hand impatiently.

"Barbara, I say, you had better think twice before you attempt to threaten me; before—"

"Think 'twice!" she retorted, mercilessly. "As if I had not thought a thousand times, and each time a hundred-fold less leniently."

"But, Barbara, I repeat, beware how you seek to cast this aspersion on my name. Remember, despite your threats, Blanche is already my bride."

"Yes, the poor, silly child is Gervaise De Laurian's bride, but she never shall be his wife. I swear that."

She raised her hand as if in mute invocation, as the words dropped like hot lead on his ears.

He confronted her defiantly, and met boldly the uncanny glare of her eyes.

When he spoke, it was in a low, hoarse whisper.

"This interview shall not be prolonged another moment. I bid you good-afternoon."

He was trying to conceal his anger, she saw, and a light of malicious triumph that she had succeeded in affecting him, was plainly visible on her features.

He strode toward the door, not stopping to offer the coldest bow, when suddenly she glided past and confronted him.

"Mr. De Laurian?"

She spoke his name in a voice exquisitely lovely, but disregarding, he pushed by her, until the second summons, followed by her strange language, abruptly stopped him.

"Mr. De Laurian, the door is securely fastened. No one can gain egress or ingress except at my pleasure. I alone, of the household, understand the secret spring in that door. I, alone, will open it for you. But, before it is opened, you must wait another moment."

He leaned carelessly against the door-post, but, despite his flashing eyes, his lips were quivering under the thick mustache, with a craven fear.

"You perfectly understand, do you, Mr. De Laurian, that I declare you shall never be more to Blanche than you are this moment?"

She spoke harshly now.

"I understand nothing of the kind. I only know you are a bad woman—"

She uttered a genuine cry of pain at those cruel words.

"Beware! remember you are alone with me, your wronged, disgraced wife—at the mercy of a woman more dangerous than a tigress robbed of her young!—powerless in *my* hands, Gervaise De Laurian!"

He forced a contemptuous smile to his lips.

"And you think to terrify me with your idle threats? Unless you can not possibly tear yourself away from my society, I would suggest that you condescend to unfasten the door, as the train in which I and my bride leave, will be due in less than half an hour."

He was playing his hand as boldly as he dare, desperate though he knew the game was.

"The train may be late, Mr. De Laurian," she said, quietly; then, a sudden gust of uncontrollable passion flooding over her, she said: "Do you think I am going to let you add sin to sin? I could charge you before the whole world with your villainy—villainy that would put you in the States Prison for years! Think you I shall let you go on and not raise a finger to punish you? *My* hand, and not the arm of New Jer-

sey's laws, will apportion you your reward."

Her eyes were scintillant; her lips apart in her fury, yet wearing that fearful, mocking smile that so disfigured her.

"But before I speak further on this subject, I will show you this letter which came to the Chase just before the ceremony, and which I kindly took in charge till a convenient moment to give you."

She pushed toward him a sealed envelope, that lay on the table.

Half-mechanically he tore it open, and read:

"Mr. De Laurian, you will at once remit the amount due on the mortgage, or the foreclosure will at once take place, and your entire estate will be sold at public auction. CLEMENTS."

There was no date; there was nothing so terrible in the communication, and yet De Laurian reeled, staggered to a chair, and with a face pale as death, gasped convulsively several times.

"Demon! devil!" he muttered, in choked accents; "curses—ten million curses on you!—you've poisoned me with that infernal forgery! I can smell it—horrors! is this death?"

His jaw fell; he writhed a moment in the chair, and Barbara Lester, with a triumphant smile, unfastened the door, and snapping it after her, went slowly down to the realms of light, mirth and joy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WIFE OR WIDOW?

At the door of the drawing-room Barbara met Roy Davenal.

His inquiring glance was understood by her as fully as words could have been.

"Yes," she replied. "He came, obedient to my summons, and, after he departed, I heard his footstep returning to the 'observatory,' if it was to renew our not particularly pleasant conversation, he will be disappointed; for I left just as he did."

Not a tremor of her eyelids or a quiver of the lips as she accepted his arm and entered the thronged rooms.

"Roy," she said, tenderly, "I can depend upon you not to mention the fact that I met Mr. De Laurian alone in the 'observatory?' I would not enjoy the petty scandal it might cause."

"I certainly shall not mention it, my dearest, unless it be to De Laurian himself at some convenient season after the bridal tour. He must apologize to me, Barbara."

She smiled brightly.

"I think that would be no more than right."

They had reached the rear end of the drawing-room, where Blanche had held her little court since the wedding hour, and who now was rather anxiously consulting a tiny little watch, set in pearls, that depended, like a locket, from the necklace at her throat.

"Oh, Barbara, I'm so glad you've come! I'm worried because Gervaise stays so long, and I'm ashamed to tell any one. I wonder where he went to? We'll surely lose the train."

Barbara laid her hand caressingly on Blanche's golden hair.

"The bridegroom has grown forgetful, has he? Probably detained by some bachelor friends over a parting glass of champagne. Isn't it cruel?"

She laughed down in the brown eyes, that wore a shadow 'way down in their clear deeps.

"Mamma thinks he should have come to escort me up-stairs; I ought to have changed my dress before now."

Why did not that loving, trusting girl read the fearful secret in those beautiful eyes that were shining down into her own? Why did she not shrink in utter horror from under that cool, caressing hand? Or why did not some voice whisper in Roy Davenal's ear the awful truth as the beautiful woman leaned so confidently on his arm?

The hour was still afar off when the mask should fall.

"I am sure mamma Chetwynd is not nervous, whatever you are, little bride. Rest assured Mr. De Laurian is secure, wherever he is."

She only knew the hidden meaning conveyed in her own words.

During their brief conversation, the guests had gradually left the room, to fill the conservatory, music-room and upper chambers; and, as Roy excused himself to accompany a young gentleman to the billiard-room, Barbara touched Blanche's shoulder.

"Come, and I will assist you to don your traveling-dress. I think very likely Mr. De Laurian is in his room, preparing for the journey himself."

So, kindly and thoughtfully, Barbara assisted Blanche to her room, and then insisted on her

sitting in the easy-chair while she removed the veil, wreath, gloves, jewels and slippers.

"I am shivering dreadfully, Barbara. Is the register all open? I wonder what makes me so chilly?"

Her hands fell wearily to her side as Barbara withdrew the tiny white kids.

"Nothing but nervous excitement, my dear; I suppose all brides feel so."

And her own bridal rose up before her with a vividness that sent a pang shooting through her heart.

"I feel so uneasy about Gervaise, Barbara. Why, I never heard of such a thing as a bridegroom deserting his bride so soon."

"For a couple of hours?" Barbara laughed; then added, lightly, "perhaps it's the 'Curse,' dear."

A scream fell from Blanche's lips.

"Oh, no! I have not dared let myself think of that aloud! Oh, Barbara, what made you speak my own fears?"

But Barbara looked sternly at the frightened girl.

"They were idle, playful words, Blanche; and I am thoroughly ashamed of you."

The tears gathered in Blanche's eyes.

"I know I'm childish; but something is wrong, Barbara; I feel it here."

She laid her hand on her breast, and then arose from her chair to exchange her white robes for the garnet velvet suit, of which one of her traveling-suits was made.

Her toilet was made quickly, and then Barbara paused before her in earnest scrutiny.

"How beautiful you are, Blanche! peace be with you!"

And then she went out from the dressing-room, swallowing a sob as she closed the heavy walnut door.

In the hall she met Mrs. Chetwynd, anxious and somewhat flurried.

"Barbara, it is very strange, but where can Gervaise possibly be? No one has seen him for an hour or more."

Barbara raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Is that so? I saw him myself less than an hour ago, and gave him a letter one of the servants had for him."

"You did? And where was he?"

"In the dining-room; and when he asked me for the quietest room in the house to read his letter, I mentioned the observatory."

"The observatory!" echoed Mrs. Chetwynd, with almost a sob of relief. "Of course the poor fellow has gone there to read his letter and fastened himself in—I've heard of the curious spring in the door."

She hastened off to tell Mr. Chetwynd, and together they went up the stairs that led to the fatal room.

Mr. Chetwynd was not a second unfastening the door; he pressed in, followed by his wife and Barbara, and then—

A horrid scream from Barbara, echoed by Mrs. Chetwynd, resounded through the Chase; with tottering tread, Mr. Chetwynd crossed the intervening space and laid his hand on De Laurian's icy cold forehead.

But it needed not that to tell the awful truth; for the glassy, vacant eyes, wide open in a trance of horror, the rigid attitude had revealed the fact that the first installment of the Curse had already fallen on poor Blanche's innocent head—as she sat below, all unconscious that she was a widowed bride, waiting for him who would never come, to begin the bridal tour they never would take!

And Barbara Lester's heart thrilled with wild triumph!

CHAPTER XIX.

A LOST LOVER.

DAY after day of that pitiful bridal season wore away, each fraught with new grief and loneliness.

The inquest had been held at Chetwynd Chase, and the verdict, substantiated by the opinions of eminent physicians, was that Gervaise De Laurian had come to his death by a sudden attack of heart disease, to which he had been long predisposed, and which was immediately superinduced by the inopportune arrival of a harassing business communication, that at any time might have illy affected him.

People were loud in the praises they bestowed upon the dead man's memory; they tenderly sympathized with the bereaved bride; spoke touchingly of the blow that had killed him—the knowledge that he had that he was a poor man, all unfit to wed the daughter of the house of Chetwynd Chase.

The papers filled columns with a sensational

version of the story, and everybody from Maine to the Pacific coast was familiar with the sad facts. Then they buried him, in almost royal pomp, in the family vault, that was built in a cypress grove on the De Laurian estate.

Later, a new excitement followed; his executor published a card affirming that after a full and searching settlement of deceased's affairs, it was found that but one mortgage existed—and that only to the trifling amount of eight thousand dollars, which Mr. De Laurian would have readily paid when due, which would not yet occur for several weeks. The estate was otherwise unincumbered.

Then what meant that letter the wisecracks declared had been the means of his death? Gradually, vague suspicions began to arise; the letter had been a forgery, then, but for what purpose, and executed by whom?

And somehow, no one ever knew who started it, came the impression that there had been foul play; perhaps, after all, Mr. De Laurian had been put out of the way; and, as there certainly had been not a mark of violence on his person, the means used had been internal ones—in plain words, people began to believe Mr. De Laurian had been poisoned.

Arrangements were made to have his body removed from the vault; the arrangements were completed, and, while the excited public were awaiting further developments, there burst on them like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, the appalling news that Mr. De Laurian's body had been removed from the vault, and the coffin left untenanted!

Nine days of wildfire excitement; days of wonder, suspicion, distrust and indignation; and then, baffled and disappointed, the world settled down with another unsolved mystery hanging to its skirts.

Wearily and heavily the days dragged on at Chetwynd Chase; to the pallid girl-bride, whose pitiful grief was extremely touching to see; to the stricken parents who plainly saw the skeleton fingers of Lady Constanza's Curse in the great blight that had come upon them.

But, coequal with the expressed sentiment of sympathy and pity for the parents and Blanche, was the one of admiration for beautiful Miss Lester, who had so openly and nobly used every available means toward clearing the mystery.

Secretly, while she rejoiced that De Laurian had had his coveted cup dashed from him by her hands, she was worn by the sudden news that had come of the disappearance of his body from its coffin; and, after wakeful nights and nervous days, had taught herself that the minutest examination by the warmest friend—if any such had abducted him in a fit of indignant enthusiasm—would fail to detect the faintest trace of the subtle poison he had inhaled.

Openly, she was all affection, all sympathy, all attention. Not enough could she seem to do for Blanche, who clung to Barbara in all this trouble like a delicate vine to the sturdy oak.

Mr. Chetwynd was proud, reserved as ever, seemingly defying even the fatal legacy that had come to him, to crush him.

But to Blanche he was ever most tender, most gentle, and always referred to De Laurian with an affectionate interest that the more won the girl's broken heart.

Mrs. Chetwynd, with her loving, confiding nature, felt the blow almost as keenly as Blanche did. Their tears, lamentations and prayers were daily mingled, and then Barbara, so sympathizing and pitiful, would clasp her sister tenderly in her arms and weep silently over her.

Thus the days and weeks wore on, and the affair grew unimportant save to the aching hearts that were so slow in the healing.

The bright May days came peeping in, and they drove out occasionally, to relieve the sad, silent monotony of home, and an old cherished friend or close acquaintance would call oftener than before.

And, as the merciful hands of Time poured the healing balm in their hearts, their faces grew lighter as the glorious summer days wore away, and with the gay-tinted autumn flowers came sweet laughter from Blanche's lips that told her heart was recovering, with all the olden freshness and exuberance.

All this while, Roy Davenal had been away from Chetwynd Chase; and again, with the autumn, he returned for a visit.

But there was a change in her ersttime ardent lover, Barbara plainly saw.

His protestations of affection were less frequently uttered, and she realized that, for some reason, her power over him—the rare, fascinating influence she had so successfully exerted—was gradually growing less.

This knowledge terrified her; for, with the mysteriously strange influences that had operated upon her, Barbara had discovered that she had learned to love this noble, honest-hearted lover, with a devotion, that had she known in earlier days, would have saved many a pang.

But, that was over with now; she had loved De Laurian, and she had hated as well; now, for this loyal, patient lover she was pouring out an affection born of great sorrow—of its womanly purity, we will not speak.

And so, this strange, almost imperceptible change fired her with a regretful anguish. Mightier even than the quick, hot passion she had entertained for De Laurian—but that would have saved her had he so willed it—was this love, that had surged up and back, for Roy Davenal; she must center her affections on *some one*; such women are doomed to love—or curse—with their affections in a whole-souled, absorbing manner.

And Roy—we know how for years he had rushed madly on; bewildered, infatuated with her glorious beauty.

How all this change had come about, he only realized when away from the dazzling light of her eyes, and the witching sound of her voice.

When with her, he was so proud that she was all his own—poor, deluded man—and, instead of breaking the meshes of the net that enslaved him, he suffered the cords to grow firmer and stronger.

At length—so sudden and sharp the rending asunder came that it terrified himself—his goddess was dethroned, and he knew, for a fearful truth, that she was a woman whose hands were not the hands he ever should clasp at the altar.

It had happened very simply, naturally, quite in the ordinary course of affairs—if that can be called "ordinary," that crushes a confidence of years and uproots a love that has grown with a man's youth and strengthened with his strength. He had read the papers; he had learned all the particulars, and then he had grown to speculating on the ghastly subject.

He plainly recalled the careless lie Barbara had told Blanche as she leaned on his arm; he had been surprised then; but now it wore a far different aspect. He remembered of what a willful, passionate nature Barbara had ever been; he knew De Laurian had had a stormy interview with her; she admitted he had grossly insulted her, and that she should punish him. All this had annoyed him from the moment he had heard of De Laurian's death; but the inquest had satisfied him—or rather, he had forced himself to be content therewith, and gone back to his Western home with only a sad gravity of manner that was naturally attributed to the distressful state of affairs.

Then had come the suggestions of poison—that had horrified him; then the fact of the forged letter; and he groaned in very anguish as the awful suspicion would thrust itself upon him; and when, later, he learned that the body had been stolen from its sacred resting-place, he knew, for a sickening verity, that Barbara Lester had had the deed done to cover her own guilty tracks.

It was appalling; yet what could he do? tell his honest suspicions to the world, and brand her, whom he had so worshiped, a murderess? help with the hands that had so often caressed her, to fasten the hangman's rope around that dainty throat? He *could not*; it would not bring De Laurian back, or heal Blanche Chetwynd's broken heart—poor, poor Blanche!

And then his fingers refused to pen the love-letters he was so wont to write; "a rush of business," he told Barbara, prevented long letters; when he came in October to Chetwynd Chase he would see her once more.

Ah, little did Barbara think, as she dreamed of and waited for his coming, that he, pacing his floor on restless, sleepless nights, was struggling and fighting with himself to banish the last remnant of love for her.

And then, while she—this jealous and dangerous woman—with a heart of living flame, was counting the hours to his return, he had decided that when they met again he would return her his plighted troth.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TIGRESS AROUSED.

UPON his return to Chetwynd Chase, early in the fall, Roy Davenal was gratified to find how very much the cloud had lifted off the bereaved family; he was delighted at the warm, cheerful reception given him, and he thought how charming an air Blanche's trouble had left upon her—this winning, engaging girl-widow, whom he did not call Mrs. De Laurian, but Blanche, as in the

olden days. Barbara was radiant, matchlessly brilliant as ever, but Roy knew his days of blind yet blissful slavery were over forever.

He had fully come to know that she was the last woman in all the world to be his wife; and, in the six weeks that followed his return to the Chase—those six weeks in which his devotion to Barbara gradually slackened, and which Barbara noted—in these six breezy, delicious weeks, Roy Davenal had learned a new, strange lesson that he feared to teach Barbara.

Yes, he actually dreaded telling her all the truth: he reasoned that the woman who would unhesitatingly and deliberately destroy a fellow-being for a mere personal affront—of course he did not know the depth of Barbara's injuries; even had he, he was not the man to justify the murder he solemnly believed to have been committed—would not hesitate at displaying equal mercilessness to one who justly would demand her indignant.

It was an extremely delicate affair, and one that, since his sojourn at Chetwynd Chase, had grown to be of greater magnitude and more extreme delicacy than ever.

But he had fully decided that, come what would, he would kindly tell her they must part forever; and why? Not because he believed her hands were stained with Gervaise De Laurian's blood, but that another, fair as the lily and pure as the angels, had crept all unawares into his heart; that, with the holiest, truest, calmest love of which man's heart is capable, he had learned—first, to pity, then to love—Blanche De Laurian.

She had grown very dear to him in those six weeks; she had come to be a very star of light to his eyes—perhaps because of the mental contrast he could not avoid drawing between her and Barbara.

He had come to learn to watch for her sweet presence, and to gaze on her delicate, chastened face, as the greatest delights earth held for him.

Of her own heart he knew almost nothing. True, when she had caught an ardent, eloquent glance from him, her sweet brown eyes would droop, and a tell-tale tinge surge over her rare face.

Not a word had he lisped of this—not a hint had he given Blanche, for Roy Davenal was too noble and honorable to stoop to such a deed when his betrothal vows still bound him to Barbara Lester.

But one warm, cloudy day in the middle of October, when the air was oppressive and surcharged with electricity, he resolved to seek Barbara, and end the carking suspense.

He walked slowly to and fro on the lawn that sloped down to the river, and from her room window, Barbara watched him as he walked.

She had just made her toilette—a task she could perform so well—and now as she stood before her dressing-bureau to give the last finishing touches, she wondered if Roy would admire her in that dress; and whether she could not win from him a warmer love-protest than she had listened to for so long.

Her dress was very elegant—a thin silk grenadine of intensest black, over whose ground was embroidered a graceful vine in rose-pink and gold-colored silk, from which at intervals, depended a bundle of golden grapes and a leaf of deep autumn red.

This singular and costly dress particularly became her, and Roy had before admired the white arms and neck which the sheer folds but half concealed.

She fastened the filmy lace collar with a large cluster diamond pin, and hung rings of the same glittering gems in her little pink ears.

The folds of the lace curtains draped around her as she sat down, and looked out upon her lover, wondering at the brightness of his face as he bowed to some one below.

Ever jealous of his favor, she leaned out to see who was there; her brow darkened, and she pressed her lips angrily together as she saw, blushing, yet confused and retiring, Blanche De Laurian.

Barbara's quick, jealous eyes perceived how surpassingly fair she was, her unrelieved white dress floating around her and over the velvety grass, and her lovely golden hair arranged high over the forehead and in long, thick curls at the back. She saw the costly jet ornaments that lent a beauty of their own to her flushed face, and the anguishful thought thrilled her—would, could Blanche supplant her in Roy Davenal's affections—she, who had once before blighted every hope she held dear?

If she should! and the flash of defiance in her eyes denoted the light in which she should regard such interference.

Just then, she was summoned to the parlor, Mr. Davenal would be pleased to see her.

The frown disappeared, and she immediately went down to the parlor, both hands extended in, and her eyes beaming, a glad welcome.

"I am so glad, Roy, you have sent for me to come down. I was just wishing to see you."

He suffered her to lead him to the sofa, and then, when he had seated himself, she drew a hassock to his feet, and seating herself, leaned her elbow on his knee.

He did not yet speak; he was scrutinizing her varying features.

"Have you no greeting for me, Roy?"

She murmured his name in tones of liquid tenderness, as she raised her eyes to his.

"I surely neglected my duty if I failed to do so."

The tones, though courteous, were decidedly distant, and she instantly perceived it.

"Roy—what have you come to tell me? Why do you speak so formally to me? Are you angry with me, dearest? Have I offended you? If I have, you can punish me no more severely than by being so stern."

"I did not mean—that is, I did not think you would care," returned Roy, hesitatingly, for, now that the time had come, he dreaded arousing her temper.

"But I do care, Roy, darling. How could it be otherwise when I love you so; when every word you utter goes straight to my heart, and is never forgotten?"

Her voice was low, and under her half-veiled lids, Davenal noted the witching tenderness of her eyes.

"You will pardon me, Barbara, if I am compelled to speak as I would not speak? I would gladly spare you the emotions you must experience when I tell you what I dare not delay to keep from you. Be ready to hear bad tidings which wound me while they wound you."

An amazed expression on her face that gathered when he began speaking, gave way to a triumphant smile; and she leaned her head caressingly on his hand.

"Roy, how could you frighten me so? I thought you were going to tell me you had ceased to love me; for that is the only news that would wound me."

He shivered as he heard her words.

"But suppose that were the news I had to communicate?"

Like a lightning-flash she sprung from her low seat, her eyes glowing with excitement.

"Then I'd murder you, Roy Davenal!"

"Barbara—No! I cannot listen to such language. I will leave you till you are calm."

He arose and bowed coldly.

"No!—stay, I will be calm. Stay, Roy, and tell me what it is I must hear. For *your sake* I will be calm."

As by magic, her anger died away under the swift-returning tide of love.

Reluctantly he reseated himself; and when she laid her warm, thrilling fingers on his hand, he wondered how he *could* tell her. He pitied her at that moment from the bottom of his heart.

"It is vain to desire to recall the past," he began, "yet I linger before I decide the future. Our future, Barbara, is not what we have both dreamed and hoped it would be. We thought it would be a lifetime together, Barbara, but I have learned it will be better for you, better for me, apart."

"Apart!" she echoed, striking her hands together and letting them fall heavily to his knee.

"What do you mean, Roy?"

"I mean we are not suited for each other; not as we should be to spend a life together. You understand, Barbara?"

He looked earnestly, yet kindly at her.

Her eyes were shining with a fearful fire. Her bosom rose and fell in irregular billows; and she clasped and unclasped her hands in nervous agitation.

"Yes."

That was all she said, but he heard how husky her voice was.

"There is another reason as well, Barbara, why I feel compelled to speak thus plainly. Can you surmise it?"

"You love another?"

Her voice continued husky and low, but there seemed a suffocating agony in her words as they fell from the red lips that neither quivered or faltered.

Roy's face brightened. After all, she must have discovered his love for Blanche.

"Barbara, you have spoken it. I love another, and beg you to release me from my vows to you."

"Who is this other?"

Her unvarying tone, her scintillant eyes, did not pave the way for the answer; yet he spoke it, bravely.

"If I wound you, Barbara, I beg your pardon; but I must tell you she is Mrs. De Laurian."

She started as if stung by a hornet. Her face paled, her eyes seemed starting from her head; with outstretched arms and motionless form she stood, bearing the first keen agony of a second rejected love.

"Blanche?" she repeated, in a strange, far-away tone, then bowed her pale face to her hands.

"Barbara, you suffer so? I am not worth it, indeed I am not. Do forgive me, Barbara." He touched her hair with his pitying fingers, but she sprung like a tigress from under it, and recoiled in contemptuous wrath.

"Never, never, so help me all the powers of Hades! Forgive you, poor, weak, pitiful fool! Never, while life lasts and memory can perform her office, or revenge do her work!"

She stood aloft from him, as if his touch were contamination. Desperate, enraged, mortified that it was not the first time she had been cast aside, and both times for the same woman!

"Go, Mr. Davenal, and remember I swear to settle this account between us. I swear to make you rue this day, the hour when you dared set aside the love of Barbara Lester!"

And she swept past him like some destructive tempest.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MASKED HEART.

THE sound of Blanche's light footsteps up the front stairs had not escaped Barbara's quick ears during that interval with Davenal; and now, as she swept on from the room, it was to seek Blanche.

She was sitting alone in her own room, her cheeks just tinted with a rare, sweet flush that was called there by the ardent look Mr. Davenal had given her as he came by; in a half-dreamy, wholly delicious state, she sat there, alone and quiet, not caring to inquire of her own heart what it was that thrilled her so. She started as she heard Barbara's rap on the door, and half-reluctantly said "Come in."

"Barbara!" The name fell from her lips in a scream of fear, and well it might, for a vision met her eyes that would have alarmed any one.

Barbara was in a state of highest excitement. The frenzy of fury caused by Roy Davenal's announcement was, if possible, augmented by the sight of this fair, guileless girl who had this second time wrought such desolation to her soul.

Empurpled with rage, her red lips apart, she strode directly to Blanche, and stooping near her, so that her breath flamed on her fair face, asked a question in her ear.

"What have you been doing?" Blanche turned a shade paler for a second, at the threatening face and manner.

"What have you done, I say? Tell me, or by all the powers of evil, I'll—"

A terrified little cry burst from Blanche's lips.

"Oh, Barbara, you frighten me! Don't, pray don't."

She raised her hands deprecatingly as if to ward off a coming blow.

"Don't *what*, you coward, you vile, deceitful woman! Do you mean I shall not brand you with your infamous treachery, your robbery of me, your daring duplicity? Blanche De Laurian—no, Blanche Chetwynd, you shall suffer for this!"

She paced the floor in front of Blanche, whose white hands were nervously wringing.

"Yes, Blanche Chetwynd, you have crossed my path the second time! Twice you have ruined every hope I had, and now Satan help you! I declare, and you shall prove my words, that trouble shall come to you for this! There have been those before to-day who have learned the unutterable woe of crossing my path."

A mocking laugh followed her words, as she noted Blanche's quivering lips.

"Barbara, I am sure you are insane to utter such words, and to me, who can answer in the fullest confidence that I have not wronged you. If I have done aught to hurt you, I know it not."

"Then you will admit you do not love Roy Davenal?"

A bright flush overspread her cheeks.

"I shall not deny it; but my love for him need not make you hate me. I shall not take him from you, Barbara."

A sneering smile curled Barbara's lips.

"Oh, no, you will not, because he himself has told me he has no further need of my friendship. You have not led him on, then?"

Her bitingly sarcastic words only made Blanche the firmer in her truthful denial.

"God knows I have been struggling against this love for weeks, never dreaming it was returned. If Mr. Davenal seeks me, that is not me who breaks your heart."

Very calm and unimpassioned the fair girl stood before the flushed, jealous woman, who seemed maddened anew as the name of her loved one met her ears.

"You lie, a false, Satanic lie, Blanche Chetwynd! Davenal was true to me, true as steel, till you came, like a snake, gliding between! and another—but for *this* sin of yours, remember vengeance shall follow, sure and swift-footed as Time itself. Since Roy Davenal chooses you before me, he and his chosen one shall learn my power, else I shall never open my mouth to speak the solemn truth again! Then, when you drain to the last dregs your cup, you will know how I have mixed it in an hour of outraged love!"

Mr. Davenal had formally requested the hand of Blanche De Laurian from her parents, explaining, as delicately as he could, the change in his views concerning Barbara. The Chetwynds had, of course, been surprised, but after consideration and consultation with their widowed child, bestowed her hand, in engagement, upon him.

They were very happy, those lovers, whose sole fear was that Barbara would, in some manner, destroy their happiness. Roy did not fear so much for himself as for Blanche. At times Blanche would be nervous and agitated, and not without cause, for whenever she and Barbara were alone, Barbara would grow enraged and passionate, while in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd and Roy, she invariably maintained a subdued mien that won their sympathy, while it was deceptive in the extreme. Blanche had never told her parents of Barbara's threats, for she was constantly hoping this insanity, as she honestly regarded it, would wear off. She would scarcely have mentioned it to Roy, except that he questioned her so closely that she could not well avoid it.

Three weeks more after this stormy interview between Barbara and Roy, and Barbara and Blanche, rolled on, and Roy lingered at Chetwynd Chase, loth to depart, yet unwilling to longer accept the warm invitations that were keeping him away from his business.

Barbara made it her especial duty to endeavor to persuade him to stay; and when, one early winter's afternoon, he announced his intention of departing by the morning train, Barbara's heart gave a burst of triumph that the moment had come at last when she might crush his sweetheart in the folds of her jealous anger. She hated Blanche with an awful hatred; her marriage with De Laurian had made her thoroughly dislike her, while her main wrath had lighted on his head. But when, for the second time, this golden-headed, brown-eyed girl had crossed her path, she swore to remove her from it with as little compunction as she had removed De Laurian.

But she had her part to play toward lulling any suspicion Davenal might entertain after her wild threats.

So that same evening she sought the lovers, who she knew were in the drawing-room. Their low murmuring voices reached her before she saw them.

"Baby! she to win him, who wore the willow for another not a twelve-month ago! And he—yes, he loves her."

She ground her white teeth together; then, by a great effort, smoothed her brow.

"This will not do. I must drive this dark cloud from my face, and the scorn from my lips, if not from my heart. I have a great work to accomplish—yes, two deeds to perform ere long."

For a single moment she paused, pressing her hands over her heart to still its loud throbbing; for with all her jealousy, her desperateness, she could not repress those heart-beats that told her she was steeping her already guilty soul still deeper in crime's abyss.

With gliding, graceful tread she approached the two.

Davenal bowed, and Blanche clung closer to his arm as she essayed to smile a greeting.

With a soft smile of her own, Barbara extended her hands.

"Blanche—Roy—I am come a penitent to you to ask the forgiveness I know you will grant."

She looked deprecatingly at Roy, whose brow was stern.

"You will find me changed, Roy, changed by trouble," she said, sweetly and sadly. "When I learned the truth from your lips that day I was overcome beyond the strength of my will to endure; for that display of passion I have come, before you leave us, to beg pardon."

Her eyes were cast down in sorrowing humility, and not the faintest semblance of the *pari* she was so consummately playing was visible on her face.

Roy bent a keenly searching look upon her.

"You have threatened most fearful things, Barbara, against this innocent girl. You remember them?"

Not a tremor of the inward rage she felt was visible; she listened apparently unmoved, then looked up in a sad, quiet way.

"I do remember to my sorrow and regret, and it is for those very threats, wicked and insane as they were, that I ask you for the third time, to forgive me. Blanche, you have a loving heart, you will accord the pardon Mr. Davenal withholds?"

Barbara laid her hand on Blanche's shoulder.

"Gladly, Barbara, and I know Roy will not be proof against our united petitions."

She smiled her free forgiveness to Barbara, and then took Roy's hand in hers.

"There, Roy, Barbara, we will all be good friends, true friends again. Although I know Barbara must ever regard me as an intruder between you two, still, as long as Roy desired it, and Barbara will forgive it, I will forget it, and we will all be happy."

Roy pressed her hand; then, though very distantly, accepted Barbara's hesitatingly offered one.

"Roy, while you retain my hand I shall tell you a secret and claim your congratulations. No one but Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd knows of it, and Blanche will be as surprised as you. It is this: To-day, in a letter from Germany, from Rex Chetwynd to his uncle, there was one inclosed, as usual, for me; but *not* as usual, a mere friendly, gossip letter. It contained, Roy and Blanche, an offer of marriage from Rex Chetwynd, subject to his relatives' wishes. I cannot say I love your cousin, as I have loved, and I told your parents so; but I know him to be a man who will make me a good husband, and I shall accept. *This* is the ring he sent me to wear if I consented."

There was no enthusiasm in her voice; only a quiet, proud consciousness as she pointed to the heavy golden circlet, over which Blanche uttered an exclamation of astonished delight. Roy bowed again, while a genuine smile of joy crossed his face.

"You have my sincere congratulations, Barbara—as a sister and a cousin!"

"Yes, indeed!" echoed Blanche, delightedly. "Barbara, dear, you are just the woman to wear the honors of the house of Chetwynd—you, so regal and beautiful. I am so glad; may God make you as happy in Rex's love as I am in Roy's."

Neither of them saw the half-scornful, half-derisive curl of Barbara's lip as Blanche bent to kiss her fingers, for Roy was too much rejoiced and relieved when he learned of her betrothal.

He little knew that at that very moment the cloud was lowering and darkening around him with tenfold intensity; little recked fair Blanche of the tragedy so soon to be enacted.

"Then I may consider my pardon sealed?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered, Barbara; and in token whereunto—"

In an impulse of imprudent enthusiasm he bent and kissed her cheek. Lightly, it is true, but his touch sent the blood bounding through Barbara's veins.

But she accepted the caress with a grave bow.

At that moment, Mrs. Chetwynd called from the adjoining room for Blanche a moment; and, urged by an impulse he could not control, Roy suddenly laid his hands on Barbara's arms.

"Barbara, this would be the happiest hour of my life, if I only knew that you were as ignorant as I of Gervaise De Laurian's whereabouts—his sudden death."

He looked almost beseechingly in her dispassionate eyes that suddenly and unexpectedly as his question had come, never blended or trembled.

"I know? Oh, Roy, can it be possible you ever thought I knew?"

She was apparently almost stunned by the cruel suspicion.

"How could I help it? your anger with him—your interview in that very room—"

"I know," she interrupted; "I see now how it looked to you. Roy, I *was* angry. I *did* want to be revenged, but I solemnly vow, Roy,

that my vengeance was superseded by one over which I had no control. I know I was passionate—but not to murder—not to murder! Oh, Roy, how could you think it?"

The tears were standing in her eyes now, so truthful and clear.

He drew a long, deep breath of exquisite relief.

"Thank God! I believe you, and you are her sister!"

She accepted both his eagerly proffered hands, and as she bent over them, a low cry of rage burst from her lips.

"Because I am her sister!" she fairly hissed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SIGN.

THE next morning Roy Davenal left Chetwynd Chase, and the family settled down once more in quiet, until the time should come when Rex arrived from Germany, and took up his permanent residence at the Chase.

He was expected by spring, and now, since he was to marry Barbara Lester, the Chetwynds seemed to love her more and better than before, particularly Blanche, between whom and Barbara a new love had sprung up, and new ties been established.

Latterly, since her engagement with Rex, Barbara had grown pensive and thoughtful, and Mrs. Chetwynd attributed it to the fact that she was not in love with her affianced husband, and would tell her the love would come, *must* come, when she was the wife of a man so perfect as her nephew Rex.

Barbara candidly admitted that she had received a severe blow when Roy Davenal had deliberately given her up; but the keen, stinging agony had given place to a dumb pain of resignation, which she thought, in turn, would give place to her old-time exuberance of spirits. And, although there was ever a quiet air hanging over her, it seemed as though those winter days at Chetwynd Chase were fraught with a sweeter peace and joy than any that had ever preceded them.

At times, Mr. Chetwynd would stroke Blanche's gold-brown hair, and look earnestly in her bright, happy eyes as if to the more assure himself that the Curse was in reality accomplished; and there was nothing more to dread.

Mrs. Chetwynd usually coincided with her husband in his opinion on the subject, but the girls would ridicule the idea of it, and Blanche sternly denied that De Laurian's death on her bridal day had any thing whatever to do with *Early Contagion's* anathema. It had been a decree of Providence, she said, and though her bright eyes would sadden momentarily at the memory, a thought of Roy would dispel it at once.

Letters from Rex were dated nearer and nearer Liverpool, to which place of sailing he was slowly traveling by rail from Germany.

Letters from Roy were so hopeful and cheerful; he had arranged for a transfer of his business to New York, so that after their marriage he and Blanche, as well as Barbara and Rex, would all live at the Chase.

The future was so bright and beautiful to them all—but one. No one dreamed that sorrow and anguish would yet tear their heart-strings to fragments, but she who would work it all—she to whom a betrothed husband was coming, who was so soon to wear the bridal favors.

Already the day had been appointed—Blanche's birthday, her twentieth—and on the seventeenth of April the double wedding was to occur.

The *trousseau* was rapidly preparing; and the entire household had given themselves up to the joyous excitement ever incident to wedding preparations.

It was still early in March when Roy came from the West, and was not permitted to make his home away from Chetwynd Chase; a week later, and one blustery, rainy night, when indoors seemed like a piece of enchanted ground, in walked Rex Chetwynd, bronzed and bearded, and as hardy as an Apollo.

Although four years had passed since Barbara had seen him, he walked up to her at once, and took her in his arms, and kissed her on her blushing cheeks and smiling mouth, and then turned and greeted affectionately the other delighted members of the circle, and at once winning Roy Davenal by his frank, winning manner.

The family circle was now complete, and the days sped on as if shod with fairy shoes, only marked by the worshipful adoration Rex Chet-

wynd daily developed for the bright, glorious woman who would so soon be all his own.

The ceremonies of this double wedding were to be solemnized in a manner worthy the wealth and social position of all parties; after the wedding, Rex and Barbara were to pass a month at Washington and further south, while Roy and Blanche were to go West.

A life of gayety and brightness seemed opening up to the entire party, and of Barbara, especially, were fairest prophecies uttered when she would become the wife of the youngest of the Chetwynds.

It was only when alone that Barbara often wondered if the fates would smile on her wedding morn; and she would spread out her faultless hands and look at them, and smile as she remembered that they had been employed in a work that stained them forever in guilt—ay, and would, ere long, be colored deeper still with crime's red dye.

The morning of the wedding-day dawned beautifully clear and bright; one of those rare days in early spring, when capricious April wears her bluest skies and balmy breezes.

The family were scattered about in their rooms, preparing for the event; only the two brides elect were together.

Barbara had gone into Blanche's room, and, clad in a dressing-wrapper, with her jetty-black hair streaming far down over her shoulders, was talking and laughing with Blanche.

"You are always done with your packing before I am, I verily believe, Barbara. Now, here are all my laces and kids to be stowed away in their boxes, and I can't trust Corinna to do them. Barbara, dear, if you *only* would, so I can rest a minute."

"I'll do them, of course," returned Barbara, quietly. "Here's Corinna; fix your hair—where's the box, Blanche? I'll take them to my room."

She gathered up the delicate trifles and closed the connecting door after her.

She laid the filmy collars and gloves on her dressing-bureau, and then, with noiseless tread and cautious hand, locked both the doors—the one opening into the hall, the other connecting with Blanche's room.

Almost imperceptibly a smile of repellent beauty crept to her eyes, and a curl of scorn to her lips.

She unlocked a tiny drawer in her bureau, and took from it a small crystal vial, with a rubber stopper.

Then she hoisted both windows, and deliberately tied a folded handkerchief so that her mouth and nostrils were covered.

Upon each glove, upon each collar, she sprinkled several drops of the colorless liquid; her eyes shining in frightful weirdness as they looked out from between the heavy, clinging masses of hair, and above the ghostly bandage around her mouth.

This mysterious deed done, she replaced the rubber-stopper, returned the vial to its drawer, locked it, and replaced the key.

She went to the window, and, snatching the handkerchief from her face, leaned far out, and inhaled deeply of the fresh, cool air.

When she returned, the drops on the articles had completely dried, and left not the faintest trace.

Carefully she arranged them in the ornamented box, and closed the lid.

"There, Blanche Chetwynd, is your reward for stealing from me my two lovers! Little will you think when you wear those dainty gloves, that their touch is fatal, or that the costly collars that look so fair around your white throat are no less death-dealing than the hangman's noose! Yes, my bonny bride, it will be slow, but sure—sure as my hate!"

She unlocked the doors, and took the horrible package to the grateful girl, and then commenced her own preparations, unassisted by any, save her own deft fingers.

She was grandly, radiantly beautiful in her trailing bridal robes of heavy, lusterless silk; the coronet of orange blooms holding the filmy veil over her shining hair.

Her toilette made, she crossed from her room to one immediately opposite, where the bridal gifts were displayed—a glittering array of costly love tokens.

At the door a maid-servant was in attendance, who handed her a tiny, sealed package, with the request from the donor to open it before the ceremony.

Filled with natural curiosity, she returned to her room to examine the contents.

Suddenly a low, agonized cry fell from her lips—the package contained a broken opal, with the mysterious "D" and the semi-chain!

A cold faintness crept over her, and a gray shadow came around her tense lips; her heart seemed rising, rising to her throat, threatening to suffocate her.

This fearful token, promised by one who had died under her hand! Heavens! *De Laurian* was alive, then, and on her track!

She sprung wildly from her chair, and paced the floor in intensest agitation. Then she seized a flask of some rare, pungent liquid, and moistened her lips, that were blue to very deathliness.

She bathed her clammy forehead and cold wrists, while slowly the color returned to her pallid face, and her heart ceased its dreadful jerking throbs.

Perhaps for twenty minutes she sat there, and then she pushed away the aromatic perfume, and rose to her feet.

"I will not be threatened by him! I defy him, to the last!"

The approaching footsteps of the bridal cortege were heard, and she had barely time to drop the ominous token in her bosom, ere Mrs. Chetwynd opened the door, and she saw the party complete save herself.

Accepting Rex's arm, she swept grandly down to the dim parlors, and, amid the quiet and impressive solemnity that reigned, the two beautiful women were married.

It was a moment of happiness, even to Barbara—only she felt the jagged edges of that opal stone pressing against her bosom, like some avenging, stealthy hand, whose ruinous power she could not avert.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STAR THAT WENT OUT.

THE month of absence, passed rapidly to the pairs who were whiling away their time in the enjoyment of travel, and by the last of May, Chetwynd Chase was in order to receive the bridal party again.

Mr. Chetwynd had had two suites of rooms on the second floor entirely refurnished; one in silver and blue for the use of Mr. and Mrs. Davenal, and the other, situated just opposite, on the western side of the mansion, upholstered in scarlet and gold, for Rex and Barbara.

The drawing-room had been beautified anew by a gorgeous carpet and curtains, so that Barbara could not but see, when she returned, how dear she was to them as wife of Rex, and mistress of Chetwynd Chase.

She had come back as radiant and beautiful as ever, dazzling all eyes and carrying captive all hearts; while Blanche, dear little brown-eyed Blanche—Well, Roy said she had not seemed well since they left home. She was nervous and despondent at intervals, and so easily tired out.

Her cheeks had sunk in a little, too, during that month of absence, that made it all the more perceptible to her mother's anxious eyes.

She was not ill, she said, only she felt so feverish, and, as Roy said, so easily fatigued. She ate quite well, and slept well, but there was a conscious diminution of vitality that could not be mistaken.

The very choicest port wine was ordered her to drink by her physician, and daily exercise in the open air; plenty of music and merriment, and nothing must worry or annoy.

Every day she and Barbara drove out in their elegant little pony phaeton; of evenings, there were social parties at the Chase, boating on the river, and moonlight croquet on the lawn.

Still, despite her care, her tonics, her cheerful companionship, it was patent to every one that Mrs. Davenal was going into a decline—one of those sure, slow-creeping, insidious diseases that are so common among, and fatal to, American women.

Then, in the home circle at Chetwynd Chase was whispered a precious secret; perhaps, when the first spring flowers came to celebrate the anniversary of the wedding, they would also do to welcome Blanche's first-born; then, the physician said, she might grow strong and well again. A great, sweet hope grew up among them: the time was coming, thought they, when Blanche would be herself again, when the rooms would re-echo with mirth and joy, and a sweet baby voice prattle in glee. All but Barbara thought these thoughts, and indulged these hopes, and she knew no mortal hand save her own could stop the fearful drain that same hand was all the while making upon Blanche Davenal's fair young life.

"Twice deserted! by her! That was Barbara Chetwynd's talisman that kept the festering sore of revenge inflaming to fierce heat; and, while her voice was low and soft, her eyes ten-

der and sympathetic, the hands were stretched steadily forth in ceaseless, vigilant, unquenchable destruction.

It was soul-harrowing—that this guileless woman, who had loved Barbara so, and who now, of all the dear ones, turned to her most naturally for affection and confidence, should be going on, and on, powerless, to her doom; husband, mother, father, cousin, friends, all unconsciously cherishing the treacherous serpent in their bosoms, never dreaming its death-dealing fangs were robbing them of what they held nearest, dearest, best.

All these days—and even more kindly as the creeping languor strengthened into marked debility, and Blanche kept her chair in the most comfortable nook, almost from morning till night, Barbara was so attentive, so tenderly kind.

It was a touching picture—that of Blanche, as she reclined so wearily in a large, cushioned easy-chair, her face more beautiful than ever in its wan, *spirituelle* pallor; her bright, sunny brown hair, that had been cut short when the first of those terrible headaches made their appearance, curling in loose, wavy rings around her forehead, and just touching the little ears, and the fair throat.

Her hands were thin, and she often showed Barbara how loose her wedding-ring was getting to be.

Hours and hours the two young married ladies would sit together, talking, generally, about the one subject that engrossed so much of Blanche's conversation, certainly all her thoughts. Dainty little garments, fashioned with tender fingers and tasteful skill, would be often seen on her lap, and at times, her trembling hands would fall listlessly down among the plummy lace and soft muslins, as if they never could complete their task, sweet though it was.

So the shadow brooded and brooded; little by little the silver lining faded from the edges of the cloud, and when, one day, Blanche told Roy she could not go down to dinner, it seemed as if the fiat had gone forth—Blanche would never brighten their family circle again.

There was ever a pensive sadness over Chetwynd Chase now; the doctors came and went, and shook their heads when Barbara implored, with tears in her eyes and a voice choked with emotion, asked them if they *couldn't*, if they *wouldn't* help Mrs. Davenal. Mrs. Chetwynd was greatly stricken, while Roy would not admit the probability of her early death.

He fought against the knowledge that was creeping over him: he resisted against the slow conviction of his bright, bonny Blanche fading away, away before his eyes.

But there came a day early in the blustering spring days when Blanche did not arise from her bed; and then the attending physicians said her life would, in all human probability, go out when the month died.

It was an exceptional case of decline, they agreed, although not entirely rare. Blanche had no cough, no pain, no hectic flushes; only that unbearable sensation of weakness and ebbing strength and vitality.

She knew she would die—almost a mother and still never to look in her baby's eyes; she was very calm and peaceful, even to the end, and died one still, starry night, just as the clock in the observatory struck twelve, with her little thin arm around Roy's neck in a painfully tight embrace, and a hand clasped in her weeping mother's.

Her last smile was on Barbara, and then, so violent was her grief, that Rex led her away from the solemn chamber of death.

After the first gust of grief had died away, Barbara insisted upon performing for Mrs. Davenal those last sad offices; those little attentions that possess such an unspeakable anguish in the doing as we realize how grateful, how gentle would have been the thanks of the one who now lies so still, so unconscious of our soft touches, all deaf to our passionate cries, and dumb to our prayers.

But Barbara brushed the clinging hair, that seemed to caress her fingers; she placed the tuberoses and geranium leaf between the marble fingers, and tenderly leaned the beautiful head on one side on its snowy satin pillow.

With quiet, refined ceremony, they buried her in the family vault, and then they returned to that inexpressibly sad place—the home—after the funeral.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRANGE NIGHT'S WORK.

BELOW stairs darkness and unbroken silence reigned supreme at Chetwynd Chase.

Above, in their chamber, Mr. and Mrs. Chet-

wynd were alone, suffering together for their irreparable loss.

In the room that had been Blanche's Roy Davenal walked the floor in a raging agony of sorrow that could find no relief, while Rex Chetwynd strove to console him.

In her dressing-room Barbara had had the outer shutters tightly closed, and the heavy damask curtains drawn within. Brilliant lamps burned on her dressing-bureau, and Barbara herself stood before the mirror arranging her hair with quiet precision.

Presently there came a low, cautious tap on her door that elicited from her a quick, subdued reply.

"Yes, Regina. It is you?"

"It's Regina," was the answer, in the same low, muffled tone; and then Barbara opened the door, and admitted her dressing-maid. She was a tall, sallow-skinned, bushy-haired woman, with thin, hard lips that looked as if they never could give or take a kiss; eyes that were small and intensely black, with an expression of merciless cruelty and shrewd cunning combined in them.

Altogether an ill-favored person, but one who had been proved to be an invaluable servant at Chetwynd Chase, particularly to Barbara.

Regina came forward with an assured, half-familiar manner that would have insured her dismissal from the room had her mistress been other than Mrs. Rex Chetwynd.

But Barbara nodded, then turned again to her task of arranging her hair.

"You sent for me. Is it about Mrs. Davenal? for I'm all ready for—"

"Hush—sh—Regina; your voice is so loud and shrill. Don't forget walls have ears."

"That is so; I'll remember."

Barbara hastily wound her hair round her head before she replied.

"Yes, Regina, it's about Mrs. Davenal. You say every thing is in readiness? then I will go on a tour of inspection."

Regina took from the bureau one of the silver and crystal lamps, and preceded Barbara as they silently left the room, Barbara locking her door after her.

Regina led the way up three flights of stairs, and into the observatory.

Regina set down the lamp on the center-table, and went across the room to the side nearest the flight of stairs by which they had ascended.

She carefully felt along the wainscot; then suddenly pressing hard against the spot she had been seeking for and found, the panel sprung away to the floor, revealing a short flight of steps, leading directly up, apparently to the roof of the observatory.

Up these steps the two women went, when, instead of ending upon the roof, they terminated at a door that Regina unlocked with a key from her trunk, and admitted them into a room the size of the conservatory below, but of much lower ceiling.

It was a room of whose existence at Chetwynd Chase no soul knew except Barbara and her ally; whose discovery had been made in a remarkably accidental manner by Barbara, months before, and who had then resolved what use she should make of it. From the exterior of the Chase, the room was supposed to be merely an extension of the observatory roofing to give a more imposing height to the structure.

There were no windows in the wall; but a large iron-grated skylight lighted it from the roof.

The room was comfortably furnished for a bedroom, and as Barbara entered, she cast an approving glance around. A Brussels carpet, worn, but still whole, covered the floor; a bedstead, very plain, but as comfortable and neat as hands could make it; a dressing-stand, covered with a linen towel; a chair; a large, well-cushioned rocking-chair, with a foot-rest; a washstand, with a set of white stone china, and a little stand, whereon lay a book or two, and a basket containing sewing implements.

Over the skylight a light white curtain had been fastened, to hide the prison-like look its iron grating outside gave the room; and a thick green damask screen, furnished with rings and brass rolls, was arranged to be drawn at pleasure.

"I hope it suits Mrs. Chetwynd, for I have had my hands well employed in getting all these things here without help and unobserved."

"It suits admirably, and is much more comfortable than I thought it would be. It really is quite a pleasant room, Regina."

"You see I could not manage for any fire, Mrs. Chetwynd, as there is no chimney, and a

stove running through the skylight would attract attention. There's my little gas-stove, though, that I make my tea with in my own room. She might have that here till the weather gets more settled. It'll be warm enough soon."

"Perhaps you had better bring it in to-night, and then every thing is in perfect readiness. Have you the key with you—the key of the vault? If so, we may as well go now as wait later, and, indeed, an hour may make a great difference. Bring my waterproof and get yours and the other, and let us go out by the servants' entrance. Regina, you are sure the maids are all to bed?"

"I know they are; there is not a soul in the house awake who will leave their rooms to-night—unless Mr. Rex does."

"Hardly, as Mr. Davenal wished him to remain in his room. Come."

Like two restless spirits the two women, clothed in their long black cloaks, glided rapidly and noiselessly through the dimly-lighted, narrow corridor that was only used by the servants to reach their bedrooms.

At the end of this silent, gloomy hall, a flight of stairs, equally narrow and gloomy, led down to a small back porch, adjoining the kitchen piazza.

It was only a step from this to a thick group of syringa trees; and once behind that, no vigilant watcher from Chetwynd Chase could have seen these women as they glided along, toward the river's edge.

It was only a walk of about ten minutes to the low marble vault of the Chetwynds that was built at the extreme edge of the estate.

Regina had no difficulty in fitting the iron key in the ponderous lock, while Barbara pushed against the heavy door.

A deathly, dank, chill air rushed out, that sent cold, creeping shivers over them, yet boldly Barbara entered, holding her lantern, that she had carried concealed under her cloak, so that its dull rays illuminated a way for her, and walked up to Blanche Davenal's casket.

There she lay, the fair, pale lily, just as they had left her, hours before.

With a steady hand, Barbara took the key from Regina and crashed in the glass that covered Blanche, as far down as her waist.

"Now, Regina, help me lift her out, and wrap the cloak around her. We have not a moment to spare—for I can detect a slight warm moisture upon her face. She will revive fully in less than an hour."

They had no trouble in removing from her coffin the slight form, and wrapping closely around it the heavy, muffling cloak, Regina and Barbara carried her carefully out, and, after securing the door again, and concealing the lantern, they easily lifted Blanche and hastened homeward.

It seemed as if the very fates of evil were with them that night, for they reached the Chase in perfect security, and in silence and safety carried their unconscious burden to the secret chamber that had been prepared for its reception.

Regina carefully disrobed the resurrected girl of the satin grave-clothes, and removed the still blooming, fragrant flowers from the nerveless hands.

A warm suit of flannel was put on her, then one of her own night-dresses, and she was covered up in the bed to await the doom, far worse than death, that the sleepless vengeance of Barbara Chetwynd had planned.

For a moment afterward, the two women stood gazing down on the beautiful, pale face; then Regina looked up at Barbara, her small, snaky eyes full of hidden evil.

"If they only knew, down-stairs, Mrs. Chetwynd. Those drops are magical, are they not?"

"Their power is miraculous, and you will see, Regina, how she will gradually recover her drained vitality, now that I shall discontinue them."

"And all the time they will mourn her dead."

"All the time they will mourn her dead," repeated Barbara, with triumphant sternness.

"And all that same time she will be wishing she was dead, and yet she will live on and on, and know what it is to feel the weight of my hand. It's a sorry thing, Regina, for any one to cross my path—especially twice."

There was a hidden meaning in her words; and the sewing-woman was not slow to detect the pointed words.

"Indeed it is, Mrs. Chetwynd, and you may rest assured I will be faithful."

"It will be best," returned Barbara, tersely.

"You may give me the vault-key, Regina. It may be wanted, and I only can avoid its being used."

"But do you not think they will discover the absence of Mrs. Davenal? Surely some one of the family will go there one day again, soon."

A little look of contemptuous scorn swept over Barbara's face.

"Do you really imagine, for a moment, Regina, that I shall allow any such bungling marks to betray me after all my successful work thus far? No, indeed! I shall myself fill Mrs. Davenal's coffin with a dummy dressed in her grave-clothes, and made sufficiently heavy to correspond to her weight. Then I shall cover the face with a thick cloth, and when a strange undertaker from New York, whom I myself shall see, comes to place the permanent wooden lid upon the casket, I myself shall superintend the operation, and see that he evinces no undue curiosity. Meanwhile, until this can be accomplished—which will be in a few days—I shall insist that no one visits the vault, as a fresh sight of Blanche will but renew the first poignancy of grief. I will get all the credit for a most kind, thoughtful interest, you see. I will be so disinterested, Regina, ever thinking of others' sorrow, and not my own."

A note of absolute triumph rung in her voice, and Regina's eyes looked the admiration she felt—and a little of the fear.

A silence followed Barbara's words, occupied in their keen watching of the unconscious girl.

She had, as yet, given no signs of returning life except by an involuntary moisture that had appeared first on her face, and which had now spread over her whole body.

Very gradually the expression of her marble-white countenance was changing from perfect serenity of repose to a half-troubled look.

"See," said Regina, touching Barbara's arm. "She seems to know beforehand the trouble she's waking to."

"And well she may," returned Barbara, coldly, "for it will be trouble such as no woman endured before. What do you think, Regina, of living under the same roof with parents who mourn their childlessness, with a husband who is distracted because he is widowed? Under the very roof, Regina, and breathing the same air, and yet as far removed as though Eternity's ocean rolled between. Oh! I shall punish her! She shall know now how she has twice widowed my heart! She shall see him, her husband, her mother, and I will laugh when she prays to me for mercy! Regina, I will make her look from that loophole yonder, and watch Roy Davenal as he walks half demented around the grounds, yearning for his dead love! And when her child is born, I will tantalize her with the joy it would give its father to take it in his arms and look into its eyes!"

And, in all the intensity of her hate and revenge, Barbara had raised her hands aloft as if in adoration of some potent power, while Regina, with a deathly shiver of horror and fascinated fear, turned toward the bed again, just as a low, quivering sigh came from Blanche Davenal's lips.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TIGRESS CLAWS.

A SLIGHT shiver thrilled over Blanche's frame; then she wearily raised her hand and pressed it over her eyes.

"Roy, dear."

It was the dearest name of all she spoke in a low, faint tone, as she had been wont to do when awaking from her troubled dreams.

Barbara stepped to her side, motioning Regina out of sight.

"I am with you, Blanche. Roy is not here."

She opened her eyes in sudden apprehension.

"Roy not here! is he ill?—oh, I remember. I must have fainted. I thought I was dying. I am better, dear, now."

She smiled in Barbara's face, but there was no answering smile; and the black eyes looked down with a terrible fire smoldering in them.

Blanche instantly noticed it.

"What is the matter? what—where am I? Why, Barbara, this is not my room!"

She had gazed idly around at first, then a wild, bewildered expression came to her eyes, heightened by the look in Barbara's.

"It is your room, Blanche, and will be for many long days to come."

Blanche struggled to her elbow, and in her weak condition, the exertion called a damp perspiration to her skin.

"But I don't understand you, Barbara, dear. I can't be in my room, you know."

Her voice was gently expostulating, and Barbara's came thrillingly back in dreadful contrast.

"It is your room, Blanche, or your prison,

whichever you prefer. And I am your jailer. Do you understand now? do you remember what I promised you, months ago, when you stole Roy Davenal from me? Ah, Blanche Davenal, I have not forgotten that!"

A look of intense horror crept to Blanche's eyes.

"Oh, Barbara! Barbara! what do you mean! Don't talk so to me, you frighten me so, and I am so weak!"

"Yes, you are weak, Blanche Davenal, but I am strong! I have in my heart the accumulated strength of vengeance that will burst on you—you, who have stood in my way not only once, but twice? Blanche, you married Gervaise De Laurian—well, and I killed him!"

A scream of terror burst from Blanche's lips, and she sunk back upon the pillows, trembling like a hunted deer.

"Yes, I killed him," went on Barbara, mercilessly, "because he had wronged me, outraged me, deserted me, all for you. I was his wife, Blanche Davenal, but not in name, he coolly told me. I was degraded that you might be lifted to the glorious honor of being called Mrs. De Laurian! But it was an empty honor, was it not?"

Cowering among the pillows, Blanche dared not vouchsafe an answer, and again Barbara, like a relentless doom, went on:

"Perhaps you little knew that while I was away on that two months' visit, it was what I supposed a lawful wedding tour. Yes, Blanche Davenal, I lived with Gervaise De Laurian all those weeks, happier than the angels—and then he spurned me, trampled me under foot, and—married you—you, the creature who crawled across my path. Do you wonder I hated you then with an unquenchable hatred?"

"Oh, Barbara—Bar—"

"But your time had not come, then; it was on his craven head I would strike, and through him crush you as well. I did strike—I murdered him, your bridegroom, and then wept with you over his loss! Blanche, I robbed you of your husband, and now, now, because you dared take my other lover from me, I have taken you from him!"

"But you can't! you shall not! I will tell him all, every word, and you shall never do it!"

"So the pussy has claws! well, they cannot hurt me. Listen to another little romance, Mrs. Davenal, and perhaps when you recall it, you can remember how long you have been ill! how the last and severest of these 'faints' terminated in what you supposed was death? Well, Blanche Davenal, every one else but myself also supposed it terminated in death, and you were dead, to all intents and purposes, to every one but me, the avenger!"

"Oh, Barbara!"

She had no opportunity of saying more, for on swept the tide of unspent hate.

"Yes, you were dead; you were BURIED, Blanche Davenal, and this very hour, under this very roof, there is weeping and wailing over your death."

Blanche had sprung from the bed with intense excitement, and now stood with her long, sweeping robe, and strained eyes, as if utterly unable to comprehend.

"Dead? buried? I?"

She gasped the words in inarticulate bewilderment.

"Even so—that was your shroud, and those the flowers you carried with you to the Chetwynd vault."

A shriek of horror came as Barbara's words fell, coldly and cruelly on her half-demented senses.

"That is not all, Blanche Davenal. If you hate and fear me now, you will shrink in utter mortal terror when you learn that all that long, wasting illness, that feigned death and genuine funeral, was the work of my hands—these hands, that, helpless as you are now, are lifted in curses on you and yours! I poisoned you, dainty thief of two lovers! and the decline was only its successful working; the faithful instrument did not fail me, and it has brought you here, from your coffin, to your prison, where you shall live, and live, and live, to feel the revenge of a disgraced, betrayed woman!"

Blanche covered her face with her hands to shut out the baleful light of Barbara's eyes that glowered down in her own.

"God help me! God help me!" she moaned, in utter despair of soul, as she staggered to the chair, and sunk, powerless, into it.

"That's nonsense," rejoined Barbara, sneeringly. "You will learn in time to endure the punishment I have for you, and until you do, your religion will not serve you much. I tell you you are in my hands, woman, and nothing

can avail you. You shall suffer a pain for every pang I have endured. Regina."

The woman stepped from the foot of the bed, whither she had stooped; Blanche looked up, and sprung to her side, falling on her knees at the woman's feet.

"Oh, Regina, you will help me! You will tell me where I am and how to get away? Oh, Regina, if you'll only tell my husband I will give you a thousand—yes, five thousand dollars!"

Barbara laughed.

"Bribes are of no avail. This woman is in my employ, and she knows what to expect if she plays me false."

Her low, intense tones were fearful to listen to; and Blanche turned away in pitiful anguish.

"I was about to say, Regina, that you will obey to the tittle the instructions I have given you. You may return to your room now."

Regina noiselessly departed, leaving the two alone.

"I am going myself now, and I shall pass the room where Roy is walking the floor in agony that will not let him sleep. It's a shame, isn't it?"

A sardonic smile curved her red lips as she spoke.

"May God be merciful to you in your last extremity, Barbara, and forgive me if I pray to die."

"Indeed you may well wish you were dead; indeed you will rue the day when you were born."

And when Blanche lifted her agonized face again she was alone.

Language seems weak to portray the feelings that filled and overpowered her as she walked, in feeble weakness, the floor of her prison.

Utter agony of soul to discover in what circumstances she was placed; utter bewilderment over the fearful disclosures Barbara had made.

"Dead and buried" she had been. "Poisoned" she had been—De Laurian a victim by Barbara's hand—Barbara a double-dyed murderess and yet Rox Chetwynd's wife; and Roy—dear, dear Roy—he thought she was dead, and here she was, living, suffering, and under the same roof, Barbara had said.

She feared she was going crazy; her head was so vague and wild.

"Under the same roof!" It could not be; this room was so strange, and she knew Chetwynd Chase so well.

And then Barbara—that was the knowledge that made her wild, frantic.

She fell on her knees beside the bed, and, in the darkness of that lone place, Blanche committed her ways unto Him, and implored strength and patience to endure what He allowed in His inscrutable Providence, and for faith to believe all would come right at last.

Her heart bled, and her tears fell thick and fast when she arose from her knees; and yet there was a secret consciousness of a ray of deep, inward peace.

Prostrated though she was, both by the drug that had so long been sapping the foundations of her life, and the severe mental suffering she had undergone, she arose and groped her way to the wall of the room, wondering, in an uncertain sort of way, if she could recognize any features of it again, now that the light was gone.

But there was no window from which to hang a signal of distress, and she need not have tried the door, for she well knew it was double-locked.

Where was she?

With a feeling of anguishful despair, she leaned against the wall, feeling almost suffocated with her grief.

"Can I be really dying? I feel so strange, so strange!" she murmured. "I must live. I will live for Roy!"

Her sudden will-power dispelled the nervous chimeras that had clouded her brain.

"Let me try to think, calmly and dispassionately," she thought, and, groping her way back to the chair, seated herself wearily.

"If I am within Chetwynd Chase, as Barbara said, this is some hitherto unknown room, of whose location no one knows but Barbara and Regina. Barbara hates me," and, with the thought, her heart sunk in fear and dismay, "and intends I shall be her victim, as poor Gervaise was—Heavens! and we never knew—I dare not think of it!"

"I am supposed to be dead and buried, and no one but Barbara and Regina knows I am alive; and here, in my father's house, a prisoner, I must live in solitude; my babe will be born—and they will never know it—oh! Roy! mother! the Curse of Chetwynd Chase has indeed fallen blighting upon me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT THE DEAD VAULT.

"REX, dear, I find it necessary to go to New York to-day. You can spare me?"

Young Mrs. Chetwynd looked down in her husband's eyes as she came up beside him while he sat reading the morning paper.

"Spare you? We never can spare you, darling; so good a daughter and so fond a wife is indispensable to us. But I guess I can let you go."

He reached his hand to caress hers, that lay lightly on his shoulder, and smiled at her.

"And you will be so kind and attentive to Mrs. Chetwynd, dear? She needs constant sympathy, you know, Rex; and, above all, don't let her and Roy talk over their griefs. It will be more than she can stand."

"So kind, so womanly, my own sweet wife," was the husband's tender, complimentary reply.

"Then let me kiss you good-by till luncheon—I will be back by then."

And, with tenderest caresses and kisses, Barbara started on the errand that, had he known its import, and more particularly all connected with it, would have frozen those kisses into curses on his lips.

Barbara made a plain, elegant traveling toilet, and reached the depot in ample time for the train that took her to New York.

Arrived at the Chambers street ferry, she procured a cab, and was driven to the dull, dingy shop of an undertaker in Second avenue, to whom she communicated her errand, and made all the arrangements she had intended.

A few purchases of muslins and flannels, a light lunch at Currier's, and then to the depot again in time to catch the train home by luncheon.

Her package she carried to her own room at once, and then changed her black velvet walking-suit for an afternoon home dress—a trailing silk of richest black.

The family were gathered in the dining-room around the table, on which a light lunch of oyster patties, cold boned turkey and dry-buttered toast was spread; with coffee for the ladies, and Port for the gentlemen.

It was partaken of almost in silence, and added to the gloom of their somber black garments, was the moaning of the March winds outside, and the cold, cheerless gray sky that was slowly covering up the last traces of the blue.

As usual, after luncheon, while Mr. Chetwynd, Rex and Roy remained for their cigars, Mrs. Chetwynd and Barbara retired to the family sitting-room—a large, well-lighted, elegantly furnished apartment, opposite the parlor, at the front of the house.

It wore a remarkably homelike look, even on that cloudy, cheerless March afternoon.

A bright sea-coal fire was snapping and crackling in the grate, its ruddy glow reflected on the gilt bunches of grapes that ornamented the wall paper; several low, cozy chairs were drawn up by the velvet drugget, near the grate; footstools stood before higher chairs, and a crimson brocade lounge was wheeled up to the ebony center-table, whereon lay books, magazines and the popular weeklies.

And still, delightfully pleasant as this room appeared, with all these appliances of luxury and taste, its long, bright crimson damask curtains, looped away by gold bands, its costly landscape paintings, in their massive frames, its dainty nicknacks and tall necked Sevres vases, it reminded them more of their dead than any other room in the mansion, excepting Blanche's own sleeping apartment.

On one table lay a splendidly embroidered mat, of gold and crystal beads on crimson velvet, that Blanche had made for the stereoscope to rest upon.

On the marble mantel was a magnificent drapery of crimson velvet, embroidered with gold braid and edged with a wide, heavy gold fringe; there were ottomans, worked in Afghan stitch, and a gorgeous-hued blanket of the same style thrown over the back of the sofa, that Blanche had made "to throw over mamma when she lay down," and a pillow to match.

Little wonder was it then that Mrs. Chetwynd's heart bled afresh whenever she entered this room and saw over and over again the mute reminders of her daughter's love.

As she entered this apartment, leaning on Barbara's strong, firm arm, all her loss came vividly upon her, and her tears fell thick and fast.

"If I could only look at her again, Barbara, if I could just kiss her *once* more, and touch those dear, thin hands!"

"It could do you no good," answered Barba-

ra, softly, bending down to caress the cold fingers she held. "It always seems to me a sacrilege to disturb the dead after they are once laid away."

"But it wouldn't hurt her, Barbara! I'd be so careful not to hurt her—my own, own Blanche!"

"Of course you'd not hurt her; I did not mean that, for we both know our dear Blanche is beyond all suffering forever; but I do most certainly think, dear Mrs. Chetwynd, that in your state of mind, and consequent physical weakness, you could do nothing more imprudent. As I said at first, it can do you no possible good, and I am confident the satisfaction of once more looking upon her unconscious face would not repay for the consequent harrowing of your feelings anew."

Mrs. Chetwynd's tears were falling like glistening crystals on her heavily creped dress, and Barbara, with her contemptuous, pitiless smile as she stood over her, was smoothing back the faintly streaked hair—streaked with pale silver since Blanche had died; and her fingers were cool and mesmeric in their touch, so that Mrs. Chetwynd, even amid all the grief that was consuming her, realized what a comfort her adopted daughter was.

Later, the gentlemen, their wine and cigars finished, rejoined them, and a general conversation ensued, while Barbara, after an hour, excused herself, and retired to her own room.

There was a sufficiency of work for her to do, and, securing her doors from possible intruders, she sat down, with a calmly-triumphant face, and nimbly deft fingers, to her task.

With creditable skill she stuffed a dummy, that would about answer to Blanche's size. This she dressed in Blanche's satin grave-clothes, and around the head she pinned a damask napkin.

This done, she wrapped a waterproof around it, and laid it on a shelf of her wardrobe; she carefully collected all shreds and litter from the carpet, and burned them.

By this time it was half-past five—a half-hour of the dinner-time of Chetwynd Chase; and intensely dark.

She rung for Regina to light the lamps, and then, with all the graceful precision that characterized her movements, began some slight alterations in her toilet.

She removed the plain linen collar, and substituted one of filmy lace; for the jet jewelry she wore heavy Etruscan gold, and wound a string of gold beads in her hair.

She had decided from the first, and communicated her will to all the family, that she would not put on strict mourning for Blanche. She would wear black dresses and mantles, but wished to reserve the right of her usual ornaments. She was satisfied they all were convinced how deeply she lamented dear Blanche's loss, and would permit her to consult her own wishes in this respect.

And they accorded her a meed of praise for her sound good sense.

And Barbara, radiant in her elegant mourning dresses, laughed at her beautiful reflection, and thought how admirably black became her!

To-night she was peerlessly fair, and Regina's eyes lighted up with a half-jealous admiration as she watched her mistress clasp the wide golden bracelets and adjust the sparkling ruby ring—it had been a wedding gift for Blanche.

"While we are at dinner, Regina, you may take this bundle to Mrs. Davenal—she will at once know their use. Then, while the servants are at their table, you may carry this," and she opened the wardrobe door and showed the lay figure. "You know where to place it, Regina, and be sure you give me the key when you come back."

At dinner that night, Barbara was unusually pensive and quiet. Once or twice she raised her hand to her forehead, and pressed it there, as if to ease some distress.

Her husband was not slow to note all this, and anxiously inquired if she was ill.

No, she was not ill, but she believed she had a headache. If she could be excused, she would retire to her room after dessert, and lay down.

Rex attended her to her room, and insisted upon bathing her temples with the fragrant, aromatic toilet-vinegar, until she assured him she felt so much better, thanks to his affectionate solicitude, that she only required to retire early to bed, in order to awake as well as usual in the morning.

Rex kissed her good-night, and rung for Regina, bidding her take excellent care of her mistress, and directing her to knock at his dressing-room door if Mrs. Chetwynd were restless during the night.

"And now, Regina, tell me quickly, for I have wasted too much time already in trying to elude any suspicion as to our work to-night. Is the coffin ready for the undertaker? Does the dummy look at all natural?"

"You will be perfectly satisfied with everything when you see, Mrs. Chetwynd. Here is your waterproof and vail; do I go with you or—"

"You remain here and tell any one who inquires that I am sleeping and must not be disturbed. Give me the key."

Out in the windy darkness Barbara went, fearless and alone.

At the vault, she called in a low whisper, and received as cautious an answer; while from the shadow of the building emerged a man, bearing a dark-lantern and a polished walnut coffin-lid.

Scarcely a word was interchanged while the two stood side by side and the man screwed down the lid. Then Barbara paid him a large roll of bills, and he departed as he came.

She stood there, alone, in that damp, uncanny place, her eyes blazing like stars, and her teeth gleaming in a smile of fearful joy.

"Safe—so far!" she murmured.

"Yes?" a voice answered.

With a little cry she looked up—and faced Gervaise De Laurian!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PRISONER'S GUEST.

FOR a moment Barbara was paralyzed with horror and fear; her lips turned ashen, and a blur came suddenly before her eyes.

"You—you!"

She gasped out the words in a struggling way that was altogether unusual for her.

"It is certainly myself, Mrs. Chetwynd—but no thanks to you for the fact. I presume you have no difficulty in remembering that?"

A cold chill was shivering over her; she put both her hands before her eyes as if to shut out the smiling, fiendish face opposite her.

"I am aware I am not the most agreeable sight you could wish to see, Mrs. Chetwynd—both on account of the story I might tell of a certain affair in which I played rather conspicuously, and the fact of the mystery that hangs over this little incident."

"Then you've come to betray me, have you?"

Her voice was hoarse and husky as she asked the question.

"Well, Mrs. Chetwynd, that depends. I would like, however, to know what all this means!"

He laid his hand on what had been Blanche's coffin, and stared at Barbara with a terrible earnestness of meaning in his eyes.

What was she to do? That question went thundering through her brain, demanding an answer; it curdled her very heart as she realized, in all its frightful truthfulness, what this man could bring her to—this man whom she had tried to murder. Oh! the terrific forms her excited imagination took in those few seconds while she strove to think rationally. He had escaped her—how, *how* had she blundered?—but she knew she had missed her aim, and that he was on her track—an avenger as she had been. Would he betray her—who had had no mercy on him? Would his hand hurl her down to destruction as her own had sought to do with him, and was even now seeking to do another?

Should she cry him mercy? Should she humble herself before him—she who was so brave before? His voice scattered the lightning train of thought.

"Mrs. Chetwynd, this plate bears the name of my wife—*my lawful wife*. I see it reads, 'Blanche C. Davenal, aged twenty-two.'"

She did not answer; and he went on, watching her closely:

"I have a fancy to see how she looks; she was so beautiful on our wedding-day."

He deliberately opened his stout-bladed knife, and began unscrewing the lid.

"No! no! you shall not touch it! She is not your wife—you have not the right!"

She jerked his arm in a powerful grasp; he wrenched it free with scarce an effort, smiling that same smile of conscious power.

"I have not the right—I, her lawful husband, Mrs. Chetwynd? Besides, if I had not the authority, who could prevent me? surely not a woman's arm; and it would scarcely do for you to shriek for help."

How true his words were! how completely he was impaling her. A little curse was on her lips for coming there.

"I shall see how my wife looks. Please stand further back, Mrs. Chetwynd."

A tense white line gathered around Barbara's

lips, and she quietly stepped aside, conscious now, with the consciousness of despair, that it would avail her nothing to interfere.

She watched him as he rapidly removed the screws, and before the last one was taken out, she had decided that there was but one course left—or, the gallows!

De Laurian lifted the lid and laid it down, glancing carelessly at the satin shroud and the tips of the slippers. He carefully unpinned the napkin, and then Barbara stepped closely up to him, so that her hot breath flamed against his cheeks, and her eyes glared almost in his own as he turned with an ejaculation of surprise and fury.

"What does it mean? Woman—fiend, explain this mystery, or by all the memories of the time when I laid, as dead, in a vault like this—I'll lock you alive in this place!"

"I said it was not your wife. Perhaps you believe me now?"

The intense calm in her voice was ominous and awful; but De Laurian only bent his face the nearer to her.

"Where's Blanche? What do you mean to do with her—or it, if she is dead? Barbara, I demand the answer—is she dead? where is she?"

"And if I refuse to answer?" She smiled mockingly.

"You dare not, you vile witch you! I'll put you in that coffin, and screw down that lid unless you answer me!"

She shuddered, but still smiled on, silently. "You refuse? Then by the powers of darkness, you shall feel my revenge!"

He jerked the dummy from its coffin, and threw it upon the damp floor and seized Barbara by the slender throat.

"Come, I'll do it! it'll be better than being hanged!"

His eyes blazed like a madman's, and a scream of awful horror came from Barbara's lips.

"Take your hands off me, you monster! My life is sweet to me, and to save it, I'll tell you all."

He smiled coolly again, but retained his hold, though loosened, on her fair throat.

"You'll swear to tell me all—ALL without reservation?"

She met his eyes boldly.

"I swear to tell all without reservation, on two conditions."

"Name them," he answered.

"You will take your oath not to betray me. You will agree to aid me in my plans."

"I will swear anything," he answered, lightly, and a strange glitter came to his dark eyes. "Now we have signed the compact, and I am ready for your revelation."

He lifted up the dummy as he spoke, and laid it in the coffin again; he screwed down the lid, and all the while Barbara was telling him the story of Blanche Davenal. He evinced no surprise, no sorrow; and Barbara wondered at the great change that had come over this man. There was, in place of the gay easiness of air, a peculiar sarcastic indifference, a something she feared to trust, a something she was forced to confide in, and—horror of horrors, a something from whose power she knew she would never again be free!

A weight had come, crushing over head and heart; and Barbara Chetwynd began to think, there was an end to her tether. Did Gervaise De Laurian hold that end in his hands?

Her very soul was sick and faint. Who had scorned to suffer remorse now felt the keenest pangs of a fear only such natures can feel.

De Laurian knew all this; she knew he knew it, and with that unbearable thought came the resolve to watch him with a vigilance that should exceed his own; and if he attempted playing her false—!

The thought lent courage, and there came to her cheek, as the two walked silently along through the wind and darkness, a flush of renewed hope.

"I am going to Chetwynd Chase," she said, at length, to De Laurian, as they reached the side entrance.

"So am I," he returned, quietly.

She turned around in quick surprise and alarm.

"You go to Chetwynd Chase?"

"Certainly. Why not? Did I not say I wished to see how my wife looked?"

His cool, ready answer bewildered her.

"You see Blanche? It is impos—"

He interrupted her, laying his hand heavily on her shoulder.

"See here, Mrs. Chetwynd. I intend to see Blanche within the hour. You will show me to her. Refuse, and you know the compact be-

tween us will be broken. If it is broken, it can not damage me, for I know your secret, and the knowledge can not be wrested from me. But you, Mrs. Chetwynd, might not fare so well."

How her heart sunk again; she was in his power as completely as ever mortal was in human power. After all her scheming, her successful accomplishment, it would end in—this!

After all, where was the use? what was it, after all, that she had sold her soul for? Only a paltry revenge, that now, in the searching light of fear, seemed so miserable, so poor. But it can not be undone; she must answer to this man, and he must use her as he chose, or else—

She involuntarily put her hand to her throat.

Not that! oh, *any thing* rather than that!

"Come, then," she said, briefly, and, with that deliberate, conscious smile, he bowed assent.

Silently they passed around the little lake, and up to the gloomy side entrance.

Not a light was visible on that side of the house, nor a sound to be heard save the pitiful wailing of the storm-charged wind as it swept bleakly up from the Passaic.

Up the dark, deserted stairs she led him, to the observatory. A grim smile parted his lips as he waited there a moment, in obedience to her words; he remembered it well.

Up the upper flight of stairs she went, closely followed by De Laurian.

"You will wait while I see if Blanche is dressed."

She opened the door; a faint light was burning, and Blanche sat sewing by the little stand.

As Barbara entered she turned wearily around, but said nothing. She had learned how useless was entreaty, how futile were prayers for mercy. Other words she had no desire to speak. Barbara went up to her, a cold, steely glitter in her eyes.

"I have brought you a visitor—your husband is—"

A scream burst from Blanche's lips at the words.

"My husband? my Roy? Oh, Barbara, I am so thankful, so thankful! I *knew* you would not always be so obstinate. Roy, dear Roy! come right in. I'm here, alive and well!"

Her beautiful eyes were all alight with sudden joy, and Barbara's heart throbbed with malicious glee, as she watched for the tableau.

The door opened widely; a footstep was heard, and with a cry of exquisite joy, Blanche extended her arms to—

Gervaise De Laurian!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OPAL-STONE MYSTERY.

THE cry of exultant delight suddenly froze on Blanche's lips; her extended arms fell to her side, and, still leaning forward, she seemed transfixed by the Medusa sight that met her staring eyes.

Barbara could see the suddenly-accelerated heaving of her chest, and the stony rigidity her figure assumed.

De Laurian advanced in a graceful, half-deprecating way, and still speechless, motionless, and with intense bewilderment, as though she were regarding a ghostly visitant, Blanche awaited his nearer approach.

Then his voice, low, not untender, broke the weird spell.

"Blanche—my wife!"

At the ominous words, a low, horrified cry burst from her lips; and she staggered back, beating at the air with her hands as if to keep off some frightful demon.

"Do not be afraid of me—I assure you I am no arisen dead; no restless spirit come to haunt you."

Blanche had gained the chair, and leaned back among its cushions, her face covered with her hands, and uttering low, pitiful moans.

"Indeed I have no wish to alarm you, Blanche! I only desired, very naturally, I think, to see my wife, whom I have not seen since the wedding-day. Blanche, dearest, you have no welcome for your husband?"

His affectionate epithet, and the fearful memories it recalled, lent speech to her half-paralyzed lips.

"Don't! don't talk so to me! Oh, why did you come? What have I done to be thus tormented? If I were *only* dead!"

There was infinite agony in her low, trembling voice, and she looked up at De Laurian, and from him to Barbara, with imploring, hunted eyes, that would have melted the stoniest heathen.

But Barbara, whose heart was fire, whose veins were filled with vilest blood, only curled her lips in ineffable disdain.

De Laurian stepped nearer her, and bended his handsome head.

"It is passing strange, my Blanche, that you should endure such torment—you, so pure, so guileless. I, your husband, have come to release you."

"Never, traitor!" and Barbara sprung between them in wild alarm.

"Never mind, Mrs. Chetwynd, please," retorted De Laurian, coolly, and then went on speaking to Blanche.

"You know how I always loved you, dearest; and you know I am naturally as anxious to have you for my wife as I was the day I was— Well, the day we were married. Blanche, my darling, come to me, and be my own, as once you were. I will lead you forth from this prison this moment, and we will forget all the past that has clouded us both. Blanche, dear, you will forget *him*, and let *me* be all-in-all!"

All the old-time witchery was quivering in his voice, and his dark, lustrous eyes were beaming in her own tearful, pleading ones as they had done in those bygone, happy days.

But a thrill of repellent horror curdled her heart; involuntarily she shrunk away.

"How can you ask it? How can you bid me forget Roy—my own, own Roy? Oh, Mr. De Laurian, have I not enough anguish without adding *this* bitter drop to the overflowing cup?"

"Then I am nothing to you—I, your *only* legal husband? You will take Royal Davenal in preference to me?"

He spoke calmly and dispassionately, but Blanche saw the steely glitter coming in his eyes.

Barbara remembered a time when he had more heartlessly cast *her* off for this very woman he now was suing to; and an exultant thrill of proud triumph shot from her eyes.

For a moment Blanche made no answer; then she arose from her chair, slowly, and as if the act caused her a severe effort. She stepped up to De Laurian, and laid her cold, trembling hand on his sleeve, and lifted her sad, haunting eyes to his dark face.

"I will answer you in all truth, and in all solemnity; as I would if my mother heard me, and Roy Davenal stood by my side; as I am willing—and believe they do—that God and His angels hear me."

An impressive silence followed; then she went on.

"I loved you, Mr. De Laurian, with all the love of my heart. Had you not met with the terrible misfortune that caused me, and all others, to regard myself your widow, I would have been a true, loving wife, until death parted us, for I loved you, Mr. De Laurian."

Her voice, so pathetic and sweet, was dignified and slightly distant; De Laurian and Barbara listened attentively.

"But I thought you were dead; I learned to regard you as gone from us forever, and I mourned truly for you. Then, Mr. De Laurian, when gentle-fingered Time had healed my heart, I learned to love Mr. Davenal, as I love him to-day, as I always must love him—as my good, affectionate husband. I think there requires no additional explanation."

She turned back to her seat, as though dismissing the subject forever, followed by De Laurian's gleaming eyes.

"I do require further explanation. I desire to know if a lifetime of confinement in this delightful apartment is to your taste? Would you rather remain here, allowing your family to think you dead, and knowing that Roy will certainly marry again some time, than be restored to them all as my wife, what you really are?"

Her lips quivered at the cold words; then she bowed her head slowly.

"I can do no more than suffer, and be true to Roy."

"As you please, madam. I admire your principles."

She noted the sarcasm in his voice, and Barbara, as she stood there like a statue, smiled grimly as she observed his scarce-concealed chagrin.

"I will come again—perhaps I will find you less romantic. In the interim, can I serve you in any way?"

She turned her eyes on him in dumb anguish.

"I want nothing but to be released from this prison—you will not do that; why should I suffer the indignity of a denial?"

"You know the conditions upon which you walk forth. There are none other."

He motioned to Barbara to precede him down; and locking the door of the room, the two, who were playing such a desperate game at cross-purposes, went silently down to the outer entrance.

De Laurian raised his hat in elaborate courtesy.

"I have the honor to both bid you good-night—and-beware! remember the broken opal stone. It has a story you little suspect."

Before her wondering lips could frame a question or retort, he was gone through the darkness.

As she stood there, where he left her, the great clock in the stable struck twelve; and it sounded to Barbara like as many knells of doom, so slow, distinct and echoing they were as they fairly thundered on the night-wind.

Her fiery eyes peered out into the dense darkness like demon's eyes, and a tinge of passionate red burned in either cheek.

Was she to be baffled, after all? had one false step led into this pitfall over which she knew De Laurian's hand was suspending her?

She knew him well; and she knew that, fired by the memory of her futile attempt to murder him, he would follow her on to the death.

"To the death!"

Often as she had contemplated the death of others, never had it fully come home to her before that there would come a time in her experience when she would be drifting away herself from all human help; when all the horrors of an unrepented life would stare her, with stony eyes, full in the face.

But to-night, somehow, such gloomy thoughts would come; try though she would, she could not banish them.

She vainly strove to assure herself that she was "nervous," but it did not lessen the knowledge that was crushing her, that Gervaise De Laurian was, of a verity, "on her track," and that too with a hangman's noose in his hand.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her.

How could she suffer for his death when he was not dead? She laughed because she had not thought of that before—a weird, strange music it was that re-echoed on the air.

"Fool that he is to think he can baffle me! Let him beware, or the next blow I aim at him will hurl him deeper than he would cast me."

She noiselessly re-entered the house, and returned to her room.

Regina was dozing in the chair by the grate, but aroused as Barbara suddenly raised the flame of the lamp, almost exclaiming as she caught a glance from Mrs. Chetwynd's lurid eyes.

"Go at once to Mrs. Davenal's room, Regina," she commanded, in a whisper. "She has been fearfully excited the last few hours, and may need your care and skill before morning."

Regina had gone, and Barbara had exchanged her garments for her night-wrapper, when there came a low tap on her door.

"Yes—who is it?"

"It is I, dearest. You are better then?"

She crossed the room and unfastened the door.

Rex met her with a kiss as he wound his arm around her slender waist.

"You have rested well, Barbara? Regina guarded you faithfully, for twice I inquired and was refused admittance."

"It was by my order, dear," she said, tenderly, "and I am very much relieved, thank you."

"I have been with Roy all the evening, Barbara. I fear he will lose his reason under this shock—I never dreamed he loved Blanche so idolatrously. However, I have persuaded him to consent to a three months' trip to the Continent—perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd will accompany him—the change may be beneficial."

"And you will remain?"

"If you will not go—unless you are willing I should leave you. It shall be as you decide, darling."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DE LAURIAN AGAIN.

BARBARA could not sleep that night; restless and wakeful, she passed the hours in busy thought.

First, she must thwart De Laurian, no matter what he did; again, a new and unexpected aid to her, was this sudden decision of the Chetwynds to go to Europe. Of course Rex must go, and equally positive was it, that she must stay. Some one would be obliged to look after Chetwynd Chase, and she was the one, whom no persuasions or arguments should deter from her kind sacrifice.

And, the coast cleared, she would measure lances with Gervaise De Laurian, and then throw his defeat in his face.

She grew bold and brave with the morning light, and though her eyes were somewhat heavy and her cheeks pale when she went down to breakfast, she was strong at heart, and was perfectly content to be commiserated on her ap-

pearance as the inevitable results of the headache she had undergone.

Naturally, the question of the European trip—to be a short one, obviously—was discussed thoroughly, and the decision was made that Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd, Sr., Roy and Rex should go in the first steamer that sailed in which they could procure the necessary accommodations.

There were to be no preparations of packing beyond the simplest needs; nothing new to be bought or made, so that all bustle was obviated, and the Continental tour was as quietly begun as an ordinary run down to New York.

Of course, as Barbara had expected, she was hardly allowed to immolate herself at the Chase, while all the household were away. Mr. Chetwynd urged her to complete their party, and she gracefully explained her reasons.

Mrs. Chetwynd asked her why she would insist on remaining home alone—and Barbara whispered, in a loving, tear-laden voice, it was, not to leave Blanche dearest quite alone; and when her words touched the sorest spot of the mother heart, Barbara wondered what that mother would think if she knew how very literally she spoke.

She pressed Roy's hands in silent sympathy, and he blessed her for it, while Rex was equally loud in praises and severe in expressions of disappointment.

So she had the "upper hand," and sent the bereaved family off with smiles—saddened, yet cheerful—and then returned to the deserted mansion in heart-swelling triumph.

She rung for Regina, when she had sat for an hour in meditative reverie.

There was an unusual flush on the woman's face, and a suspicion of moisture in her snaky, bright eyes.

"Well?" Barbara said, as the woman entered.

"It is well, indeed. Mrs. Davenal gave birth to a daughter this morning at five."

Barbara started.

"I am glad it's over. And she is well?"

"As can be expected—but, oh! so stricken in soul, and so patient under it all."

"That will do," returned Barbara, curtly.

"Sentiment does not become you, at all. As I have not seen Mrs. Davenal for a fortnight—since the night of my headache, you remember, I will pay her a call later in the day. I sent for you, Regina, to give notice to the servants that they can take a holiday of a month—beginning with Monday week next. Their wages will go on as usual."

"And if I might ask, who is to do all the work?"

Barbara frowned at the flippant question.

"You—or I, if you are not able."

Regina was silenced, and Barbara dismissed her with a gesture.

After she had gone Barbara sat several moments longer.

"The house will be empty, excepting Regina and I—I do not count any others. It shall be securely fastened on all sides, and we will see if De Laurian gains ingress to my lady's chamber; and when the Chetwynds return, Blanche will not be at the Chase. I have a better hiding-place than this, which he shall never learn."

The week that intervened between that day and the heira of the five servants passed in usual routine to Barbara. She drove out, and sewed, and read; made a call or so, and took good care to inform her hostess, every time, that the Chase was to be closed for a month while she made a little visit to Philadelphia.

The servants gone, the shutters were closed, and blinds on the ground floor drawn. The rear entrance not only locked, to keep De Laurian out, but double-barred, and Barbara smiled when she saw how secure they were from any possible intruder.

It was not until then—when Blanche's baby was nearly three weeks old—that Barbara kept her word of seeing her.

There was not a heart in the world, except Barbara Chetwynd's, that would not have melted into infinite pity and compassion toward that fair, pale young mother, as she lifted her eyes, in mute, touching entreaty, to Barbara's face, when she came in and stood, half-frowning, half-smiling, at the infant that lay on Blanche's bosom, its tiny pink fists doubled up as if to protect its mother from this sworn foe. For a moment neither of the two spoke, though Blanche's trembling lips, and dumbly anguished eyes were more eloquent than language could have been.

"Well," said Barbara, after the moment had expired, "the baby looks like Roy—very much indeed. Wouldn't he like to see her?"

A moan of pain the tantalizing words called forth was Blanche's only answer.

"What shall you call her, Mrs. Davenal? You remember the old promise to name the first daughter after me?"

A perceptible shiver thrilled Blanche's frame, and Barbara laughed.

"You would not want to curse her so, would you? But Mrs. Davenal, if you will tell me what the name is to be, I will do you any small favor you will name."

A flush of excitement sprung to Blanche's cheeks.

"Oh, will you, will you let me go down and see them? Barbara! Barbara! I will go down on my knees in the humblest entreaty! I will pray to you as I never prayed to mortal before! Oh, Barbara, I will forgive you to the uttermost *every thing* if you will *only, only*, for mercy's sake, for my guileless baby's sake, let me be released from this living tomb."

She was kneeling before Barbara now, with an arm clasped around her baby, the other reached to Barbara's hand that she was pressing with an agony of persuasion. An expression of extremest surprise crept into Barbara's eyes.

"That is an unprecedented favor to ask; yet, if—"

Her half hesitating manner implied that she was not as invulnerable to Blanche's pleadings as she had been hitherto. And the heart-sick prisoner was strengthened with a new, wildly delicious hope.

"Say you will, Barbara, for Heaven's sake! I promise you you shall not be punished; I solemnly vow to shield you from all harm, for they will be so glad to get me back, that they will pardon you I am certain."

Barbara looked thoughtfully a moment.

"And if I allow you to go down to your own room, or the lower floor—whichever you prefer—you promise to—"

"I will promise blindly whatever you ask. Oh, Barbara, I am so glad, so ecstatically thankful. Come, right away, Barbara. I am all ready."

She trembled with the reaction that had so suddenly come to her, and her brown eyes wore a glitter of intense feverish excitement.

"Barbara, I am all ready—see, I have wrapped a blanket about the baby, and I am not at all chilly. Do come, I am so impatient."

A strange smile crossed Barbara's lips as she walked over to the door.

"Come, then, I will trust to your word."

A shriek of joy she could not control burst from her lips, and shivering from head to foot, in the exquisite anticipations that crowded before her, she followed closely upon Barbara's steps, through the observatory, down the stairs, through which she went in silent astonishment that their existence had never been known to her, to the dear old familiar floors below. She seemed walking on air; what would she do she thought when she entered their presence? Would they be alarmed, and shrink from her, thinking her a departed spirit? or would her own excess of joy, at the meeting, overcome her, and break the heart-strings that trouble had so nearly snapped asunder?

In such imaginings as these, Blanche walked down to the light and joy she knew would greet her.

"Barbara," she said, lowly, "it must be as late as eleven o'clock; do you not think they will all be sleeping? Do you not think I will frighten them by appearing so suddenly?"

Barbara smiled—one of her olden-time smiles, so kindly and heartfelt, Blanche thought—poor, innocent child!

"Ever thoughtful, Blanche, for others, rather than self. Suppose you go to Roy's room—he would hail your spirit with rapture, I am sure—and explain as rationally as you can, without implicating any one until later."

Blanche pressed Barbara's hand ardently.

"I know my husband will not be alarmed, for he knows how truly I love him. And will you break the news to my mother?"

"I will, and we may well anticipate the most joyous re-union the world ever saw, in a very few minutes."

Trembling in every limb, and her heart palpitating so fearfully that it threatened to suffocate her, Blanche crossed the corridor to the door of the old-time room, while in the shadowy corner, Barbara sneered at her in mocking, laughing silence. Blanche almost flew across the darkened room—to find the bed unoccupied. A cry of disappointment fell from her lips, followed by another, of sudden thought.

"Of course he is smoking in the library—I will go down, Barbara."

She glided on like the wind, closely followed by the vengeful, silently-smiling woman, to the drawing-room door that was partially open, re-

vealing the brilliantly-lighted room, and disclosing the unmistakable odor of a cigar.

The glory in her eyes deepened and darkened as she glided through the door, while at the same second a startled, half-fearful look banished the mocking light from Barbara's eyes.

Then, simultaneous with the intense anguished cry of disappointment from Blanche, came a hissing noise of rage from Barbara, as they both involuntarily uttered—"Gervaise De Laurian!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FOE IN THE HOUSE.

WITH an easy, graceful courtesy, Mr. De Laurian threw his cigar into the fireless grate, and bowed to the ladies, at once noticing the white heat and chagrin of Barbara's face, and the pitiful grief in Blanche's.

"Blanche, my dear, my delight at seeing you is only equalled by my astonishment. Permit me to offer you an easy-chair, and, at the same time, my congratulations. Mrs. Chetwynd, your most obedient."

It was wonderful, the cool, indifferent air he assumed.

"How did you gain access to this house?"

Barbara spoke hoarsely, and her black eyes flamed maledictions on his head as he easily and quietly stood to listen.

"In a perfectly natural and legitimate way, dear madam. Through the front entrance."

"The front entrance!" she repeated, in astonishment. "Has Regina dared—"

"Not so fast, madam, if you please. Regina has nothing whatever to do with it; indeed, I doubt if she knows I am in the house. Of course I should not have ventured, by using the latch-key my revered father-in-law gave me, unless I had been assured the family were all off for Europe, and—"

"Europe!" and Blanche sprung from the chair, pale as death. "Oh, Barbara, then you have deceived me again? How can I bear it? How can I live?"

The hot tears, forced from a doubly-bruised heart, fell on her baby's face, making it move restlessly in its slumber.

"My tears scorch you, don't they little one? Oh, I would to God we were both sleeping the sleep that tears could not disturb, nor any trouble awaken."

She spoke in passionate earnestness, such as neither Barbara nor De Laurian had ever seen her evince before.

"You must not wish such a terrible calamity, Blanche, for who knows what good fortune will yet dissipate the cloud that seems so dense?"

He glanced at Barbara as he spoke, with an expression of challenging power.

"It's not at all probable that Mrs. Davenal will ever find her condition bettered, sir," she retorted, coldly; "at least, not while I am alive."

"But you may die," he returned, carelessly, "or, be baffled."

"Mr. De Laurian"—and by a mighty effort she forced herself to be calm outwardly, while a fearful fire was raging within—"you have intruded yourself upon me to-night as no gentleman would; will you be so good as to retire?"

"If my presence annoys you, madam, perhaps you will be rejoiced to learn that I did not come to Chetwynd Chase to see you. I came purposely to see Blanche, and for a cause that will not annoy her, I am sure."

His brows were a gathering frown as he addressed Barbara, and then, not waiting for any answer she might give, turned away as if utterly ignoring her, and leaned respectfully on the back of the tall Gothic chair Blanche occupied.

"If you will promise to forget and forgive the thoughtless words I used to you the last time I saw you, Blanche, I will promise to forget that I have lost you forever, and, to prove how sincere I am, I am going to save you."

Barbara sprung across the floor like a tigress and confronted him.

"I will not listen to such language, Gervaise De Laurian! Touch her at your peril!"

"Exactly; you can play queen of high tragedy as well now as ever, I perceive."

Blanche had arisen from her chair in painful suspense as he addressed her.

"You will take me away where I will be safe until Roy returns? Oh, Mr. De Laurian, you deserve more kindness from me than I have been giving you since I saw you last! But do not tell me, unless you will, Another disappointment will kill me, I know."

"I will not fail you, Blanche. This very hour you leave Chetwynd Chase in the carriage that waits at the gate."

He turned around to enjoy the blank expression of Barbara's face, that rapidly changed to one of desperate alarm.

"I will kill her where she stands first! You shall not thwart me after all these months and years."

"I will thwart you, Barbara Chetwynd. I have a memory that can never die of the hours I hovered over death's chasms, and by that memory I swear to baffle you and deliver Blanche."

He spoke with awfully stern quiet, and Barbara knew he was no mean adversary with which to measure lances.

"And I," she retorted, in an equally intense tone, "am ever haunted by the memory of an hour wherein I learned what you had made me and by that memory I repeat my oath of sleepless vengeance if you dare do this thing. Another time, Gervaise De Laurian, success will crown my efforts."

"Perhaps," he answered, meaningly. "Will you ring for Regina to bring Blanche's and her infant's clothes?"

"I will—I will, myself," answered the nervous girl, and she sped to the bell-rope and rung a peal that awoke weird echoes in that gloomy house.

Several seconds a deathly silence reigned; Blanche jerked the tassel again and again, but there was no answer, and she turned, half-despairingly to De Laurian.

He smiled assuringly.

"Never mind; it is as I expected. I merely wished Regina to be summoned to demonstrate to Mrs. Chetwynd how utterly powerless she is to prevent this step."

A fear crept into Barbara's eyes. Was there a conspiracy?

"For the sake of filthy lucre, Mrs. Chetwynd, Regina has left your service and entered mine. She awaits in the carriage, with all the necessary garments."

Barbara seemed stunned.

"So, you see," he went on, relentlessly, "you can't depend upon what anybody says; for instance, when I vowed to aid and abet you in keeping Blanche a prisoner under her father's roof."

Little flocks of foam gathered in the corners of Barbara's lips, and her eyes glowered like an infuriated beast brought suddenly to bay. Her livid mouth essayed to speak, but language seemed to have left her.

"Blanche, I am going to watch Mrs. Chetwynd, with this loaded revolver in my hand, that I shall direct at her temple. Do you take the Afghan off the sofa and wrap it around you and the little one, and hasten to the gate where the bronze fawn is. I will rejoin you in a moment, and drive you to a place of safety."

He never once moved his eyes off Barbara's face; while Blanche, with almost superhuman speed, wrapped the sofa blanket about her and her babe, and flew out of the house and through the darkness to the appointed spot.

At the gate stood a close carriage, and by it waited Regina, who lifted Blanche in, and then seated herself, talking in tender, pitying and withal cheerful tones, explaining how Mr. De Laurian had met her in the grounds that very evening and won her over to his side.

In the drawing-room the two still stood, silent and motionless, a terrible tableau to look upon.

Step by step De Laurian retraced his way to the door, his eyes never roaming from that rigid, stony face, to which the revolver was relentlessly pointed.

At the door he bowed, gayly.

"Au revoir, madam. Shall I wish you pleasant dreams?"

She made an effort to speak, and De Laurian heard her swallow, as if a lump were in her throat.

She advanced a pace, then slowly raised her hand, and pointed her finger at him.

"Go—but, remember, I have not done with you yet."

He smiled, mockingly, and closed the door. She heard the snap of the dead latch, and knew she was alone, at the witching midnight, in the house where she had wrought such dire misery.

She heard the crunching of the carriage wheels as they rolled rapidly away; and she knew, as in a dream, that Blanche Davenal was safe from her jealous wrath and hate, but—and a fervent hope arose in her breast that De Laurian would prove a more terrible foe to her than ever she had been!

That De Laurian intended to restore Blanche to her parents, husband and home she had not the remotest idea. She knew him far too well to give him any credit for such nobility of

spirit. She knew he only used this method to get Blanche into his own power.

Now, as she sat there all alone by the fireless grate, cursing De Laurian from the depths of her foul heart, and hurling anathemas on the head of the woman who had played her so false, she wondered what she had better do?

Remain, as usual, at Chetwynd Chase?

Unless De Laurian chose to expose her, there was no reason why she should leave it. But she had no confidence in De Laurian's not exposing her. At any moment he might brand her with her guilt, and secure her a reward she did not crave.

There was not much to attach her to Chetwynd Chase, now that the object of her sweet revenge was, indeed, beyond her power.

She did not care for her husband, nor for the Chetwynds; and if she had, the fear of exposure would drive her away.

Yes, she would go away. No human being should know where, and only De Laurian, why.

Afterward—a wild, unnatural glitter in her eyes alone denoted the current of her thoughts as she ascended the stairs to pack a hand-satchel.

At sunrise next morning she was gone, and the Chase was deserted and gloomy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BEATING AGAINST THE BARS.

THE carriage containing the party from Chetwynd Chase drove rapidly along the star-lighted road, the silence within unbroken by conversation.

A short distance only had been traversed, when Blanche fell asleep, overcome by the excitement she had undergone, and assisted by the easy motion of the carriage.

It was early daybreak when she awoke, and found the carriage had drawn up before the door of a large, handsome building of brick and marble trimmings; one of a row precisely like it.

She looked anxiously from the window, and saw De Laurian gathering up the parcels.

"Why, Regina, this is New York!"

She spoke in some suspicion.

"New York, ma'am, and a great deal better than Chetwynd Chase. Let me take the baby, while you alight."

De Laurian gravely and kindly assisted her from the carriage and up the marble steps to the entrance.

"You will be obliged to remain here, Blanche, until I can procure the address of your party in Europe, which I can do at Mr. Chetwynd's banker's, when I will telegraph. I hope you will be comfortable; Regina has my strict orders to do everything for your comfort."

He was so grave, so kind and considerate that Blanche's heart ached for him. He must have suffered terribly when he learned she was the wife of another, and yet, with all that knowledge, he was aiding her to a reunion with Roy.

Her eyes were bright with tears as she seated herself in the chair he drew up to the window.

"Oh, Mr. De Laurian, how can I ever thank you? It seems so strange to think you should be doing all this."

He turned his head away for a second, as if to hide some emotion.

"I only desire to secure your truest friendship in the place of the dearer sentiment I lost. Regina, will you see that the cook has breakfast up?"

Blanche was so grateful to him. Every thing was arranged with such perfect good taste; a furnished house, a competent housekeeper, and Regina. What could be nicer! And she shuddered as she contrasted this delightfully cozy home with her cheerless room at Chetwynd Chase.

She asked Regina on what street they were, but Regina didn't know. Blanche did not much care, so happy was she with her baby, her personal liberty, and the assurance of De Laurian that he had telegraphed to her father at Liverpool, where his permanent address was left.

It might be several days before an answer came, De Laurian said, for the party might be traveling through some quiet little town where mail communication was infrequent.

But he bade Blanche cheer up and wait patiently.

A week rolled by, and there came no answering telegram; Blanche wondered a little at first, then grew nervous and speculative, and finally sent Regina to ask Mr. De Laurian to come up to the parlor, she must see him.

He was finishing a cigar when the message was delivered.

"I shall be with her at once, Regina," and he lowered his voice to one of confidential meaning. "I depend upon you. You will not fail!"

She bowed her assurance, and allowed De Laurian to precede her from the room.

As he passed up the basement stairs, with a curious smile on his face, he looked back a moment.

"You may as well secure the doors, as I explained."

Then he ascended leisurely, and entered the drawing-room, shutting the door as he passed through.

"Well, Blanche?"

"Oh, Mr. De Laurian, what do you think can be the reason we get no word? Can anything have happened to Roy or mother?"

"I think nothing has happened to them to make you uneasy."

"Then, why don't they answer?"

De Laurian looked across the room at Blanche's sweet, girlish face, all aglow with the returning spirits that lent such radiant beauty to her.

He moved his chair nearer to her before he spoke.

"I think I know the reason, Blanche. Do you wish it?"

There was something in his peculiar tone of voice, no less than language, that made her instantly raise her eyes to his own in a vague uneasiness.

"Certainly, Mr. De Laurian, if you know why."

He deliberately rose from his chair and crossed the narrow space that intervened between himself and Blanche. Laying his hand lightly on the back of her chair, he bent his head to her face, and very quietly, very meaningfully, told it to her.

"Because, Blanche, I did not telegraph."

She sprang affrightedly from her chair, and confronted him with dilated eyes.

"You did not telegraph? Mr. De Laurian, You have assured me time after time that you did so."

She was alarmed, and he saw that such was the case.

"Sit down again, Blanche, and let me explain."

"No, I would rather stand. But, Mr. De Laurian, you can go at once and send a dispatch. Will you not? or I will."

He compressed his lips more sternly, and Blanche, with a sinking heart, wondered what new calamity was about to overtake her.

Oh, that dreadful, dreadful Curse of Chetwynd Chase!

"I will be explicit and candid, Blanche. I did not telegraph, and I shall not telegraph for the same reason. Do you suppose for one moment that I am going to surrender my wife to another?"

Then her heart indeed almost broke with the ominous words, and she shrunk away, into the furthest corner of the room, her startled eyes fixed on his smiling, handsome face.

"You are not repulsed by my truthfulness, Blanche?"

"Mrs. Davenal, in the future, whenever you dare address me!"

Her indignant tones made no difference to his stern, mocking smile.

"You speak treason, Blanche. Did I not, with my own hands, place the marriage-ring on your finger? Am I not alive before you to-day?"

There was crowing triumph in his voice.

"You have done all you claim, Mr. De Laurian, yet when I solemnly affirm that I am, by every right, the wife of Royal Davenal, you cannot but secretly confirm the truth."

"Your reasoning is worthy a woman," he rejoined, pleasantly, "still if I choose to assume my legal authority, you cannot well help it. This is my house; you have lived here as its ostensible mistress a week; I have mentioned you as my wife, and the child is supposed to be ours. What will you do, Blanche?"

Her eyes were bright with the insult, and she moved to the door.

"I will this moment leave the place I regarded as an asylum in my distress. Better, far better the prison room at Chetwynd Chase than this gilded cage and you for a jailer."

De Laurian interposed between her and the door.

"No, no, Blanche! do you think I shall allow any such shallow excuses to blind me? No, indeed. You are my wife, and as such shall I claim you before the world. As my wife, you have no need to leave your husband's roof and protection in this romantic style. Be reasonable, Blanche; for my oath upon it, you shall

remain here with me so long as I choose to remain."

"Mr. De Laurian," and Blanche replied in low, thrilling tones, and as she moved from the shadow to the light her pale face and intensely bright eyes almost startled him, "do you desire me to understand that I am a prisoner here, in New York, with a dozen policemen in call from any window in the house?"

He bowed politely.

"You are perfectly correct in your surmises. Of what avail are a whole squad of police if you do not summon them? And suppose the windows are so well guarded that it is decidedly impossible to raise them, the shutters so arranged that you cannot gesture through them, and the walls so thick no voice or combination of voices can be heard beyond them?"

The hot color rushed to her face.

"Monster! how ever could I have trusted you?"

An amused laugh fell from his lips.

"I have asked myself that question more than once. It is rather singular, to say the least."

Suddenly she hastened up to him, with extended hand and agonized face, as if the horror of the position had unnerved her.

"Mr. De Laurian, surely, surely you do not mean all you say?"

"I do mean all, and more than I say."

His even, dispassionate tones fell like a death-knell on her ears.

A dusky paleness overspread her face, and a chilling terror crept into her sweet, hunted eyes.

"Mr. De Laurian, the day will come when, in sackcloth and ashes, you will repent this deed. I, who never have wronged you in word or deed, do not regard you my jailer, or this house my prison. I am in the hands of an all-wise God, and this dense cloud through which I am groping is a Providential dispensation, which, though I cannot comprehend, I do not presume to question, and accept, as submissively as I can, and trying to believe that there is light ahead for me even yet."

Her reverent, half-pitiful words elicited but a stately bend of his hardened neck as he passed through the door, and assuring himself as he went that the entrances were all secured beyond the possibility of mistake.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A STRANGE, STRANGE STORY.

As soon as De Laurian had returned to the basement, Blanche instantly left the drawing-room and ascended to her private bedroom, where her little one lay asleep. She locked and bolted the door, and without a moment's hesitation, commenced to fold neatly together the plentiful supply of clothing Regina's careful forethought had supplied when they left Chetwynd Chase.

This done she rung for Regina, and sat down by the bedside, where her baby slept, with a nervous glitter in her eyes and a trembling of her pallid lips.

Very shortly Regina's footsteps came sounding through the hall, and paused at her door; then when Blanche had unlocked the door, she entered, while the door was again secured.

"Sit down, Regina, I want to talk to you; not as a servant, but as a friend who has a woman's heart. I have no friends left, Regina, unless you will be one."

Her low, sad voice brought a sudden twitching to Regina's lips, and she drew her handkerchief across her mouth as if anxious to hide the weakness of which she was ashamed.

"I hope I never have been unkind to you, Mrs. Davenal."

"Oh, no; I know that. Indeed you have been most kind in your attention and services. But, Regina, we have both been most cruelly deceived by Mr. De Laurian, who has only rescued me from Barbara Chetwynd's power to use his own. Regina, when did you learn that he was not dead?"

A dull red flush crept slowly over the woman's cheek before she answered.

"I cannot remember the exact day when I first knew of it."

Her evasive answer elicited surprise from Blanche.

"Why, Regina, surely you must know? Why do you blush so? Is there any mystery that you are connected with? Regina, dear Regina, tell me all, and let us be friends that can counsel each other, on whom each can depend."

Blanche wound her arm in sweet persuasion around the woman's neck, and felt that strong, masculine frame shivering under the touch.

"Mrs. Davenal, you never can know the burden I am bearing, and have borne so long, so long! Oh, if I only might tell you!"

It came out in a sudden and almost unaccountable burst of impulsive pathos, these strange words of Regina's, and Blanche's eyes dilated as she looked upon the quivering mouth and moist eyes of the woman, who, until this moment, had always been the impersonation of repellent sternness and disagreeableness, although, as she herself averred, and Blanche admitted, her action had been marked with a tender kindness and delicacy of attention strangely at variance with her appearance.

"You know all my sorrow, Regina, and that I can appreciate all yours. You know I have endured enough to dethrone my reason, and yet a merciful God has spared me until now; and I will believe He will lead me yet to the light. Tell me your troubles, Regina, and let me at least condole with you."

Regina bent her head a moment as if deciding a vexed question; when she raised it and smiled at Blanche, she looked like a new being, so completely had Blanche's womanliness worked upon her rough spirit, and aroused the softer sensibilities of a nature blunted by circumstances.

"Mrs. Davenal, do you remember when I first entered service at Chetwynd Chase?"

"Distinctly; it was just previous to my marriage to Mr. De Laurian."

She involuntarily shivered as she spoke of it, and at its mention, Regina's round, bead-like eyes fairly snapped.

"You are right. I came unrecommended, just when you were short of help, offering to forfeit a month's wages if my services were not satisfactory. Miss Barbara was not at home then."

There was strange significance in her voice; a mingled anger and sorrow.

"No, she was—you know where she was, Regina, those weeks we all supposed her on a visit?"

"I do; and I knew long before I heard her tell you the story that night in the observatory chamber. I knew it and knew her, and knew Mr. De Laurian long before I ever saw Chetwynd Chase. I knew you, too, Mrs. Davenal, when you were a baby no bigger than the little one yonder."

There was calm truthfulness in her eyes and voice, and manner, although Blanche stared incredulously at her.

"Why, Regina?"

"It is true; I am going back to the beginning, Mrs. Davenal, and I am not going to keep any thing back. When you've heard all my story, if you'll take me for your friend, I will swear allegiance afresh to you and yours."

Again that same significance of language, and Blanche looked back in those ugly, truthful eyes with a glance of bewildered helplessness.

"I am so mystified, Regina, and yet I am so sure I can trust you. Did you really say you would swear fealty afresh? Have you ever done so before? When, Regina?"

She was nervous; her white hands clasped and unclasped in a tremulous, unconsolable excitement as she waited for a solution to this mystery.

"First of all, Mrs. Davenal, I have to tell you that when you were born I was the nurse who took care of your mother and yourself. There is nothing wonderful in that, is there?"

"No; it is simply a coincidence. Go on."

Blanche spoke in a low, intense voice that betrayed her deep interest.

"Yes, it was an incident that has molded my life, more or less, ever since—that, for the past year, has affected it entirely. Had I never hired to Mrs. Chetwynd, I would have been a happier woman to-day, with a less horrible load eternally crushing me down."

She paused and gazed dreamily at her listener.

"Oh, do go on," said Blanche, almost in a whisper.

"Mrs. Davenal, are you afraid of Mr. De Laurian?"

She asked the question abruptly.

"Afraid! Oh, Regina, I do not know how I regard him. He terrifies me so; he abused Barbara so—"

"Well, I am more afraid of him than anybody in this wide world."

Blanche interrupted her in a low, stern tone.

"And yet you deliberately act in his employ?"

"Not deliberately, Mrs. Davenal, but conscientiously. I followed him because I might be near you; that I might serve you, though indirectly, and, if needs be, save you as I would in time have done from Barbara Chetwynd, to

whom I promised allegiance as I have promised Gervaise De Laurian; with whom I broke my faith, as I shall break it with him."

A little sob of joy broke from Blanche's lips.

"You will save me, dear Regina? You will let me go out of this house, free as the air?"

"Before the night-shades fall, Mrs. Davenal, I solemnly swear you shall be out of that front door, with your baby in your arms free to go wherever you please, back to Chetwynd Chase, to a hotel to await the answer of a telegram you will of course send—or anywhere you choose."

Blanche rapturously kissed the brown, horny hand that she moistened with her glad tears.

"God ever bless you, Regina! And now for the rest of your strange story."

"A year ago, while Barbara—you will learn directly why I call her so informally—and De Laurian were on their pleasure tour, I first made his acquaintance. I was in a second-hand jeweler's store, trying to dispose of a ring I had given me, and for which I preferred its value in money, as I was almost desperate in my poverty. Mr. De Laurian was looking through some old-fashioned curiosities for a priceless bauble I heard him offer a hundred dollars for."

"I looked up at him, wondering why he was so lavish of money and I so poor, when I suddenly caught sight of a broken gold chain and an opal stone—the other half of the ornament had offered so great a sum for."

"My heart gave a bound—I possessed the remaining portion of that chain and opal, and my cheeks crimsoned as I was thus suddenly reminded of how I came by it."

"I offered to show him the gem; he accompanied me home, and paid me the money for my treasure, and as much more for the information I gave him; and as it startled him, so will it startle you, Mrs. Davenal."

Blanche was listening intently, and Regina went slowly on.

"I told him there was a legend connected with that broken opal stone, that was marked as though the entire stone had borne three perfect letters, 'D D D.'"

"Sure enough, when he compared the half he had and the half I had, the surmise was correct. He told me then how he had stolen the chain—you will remember he pretended it fell into a grating? He let it fall up his coat-sleeve."

Blanche started with surprise.

"I remember it well. Can it be possible? It was our only relic of Barbara's identity, if ever it should be traced out."

"It was traced out, Mrs. Davenal. I held the key to unlock that secret, and Gervaise De Laurian's money bought the key. He knew then, before he deserted Barbara, who she was; he knows to-day who she is. Would you like to know?"

Regina asked the question almost pityingly.

"Indeed, I would."

"Mrs. Davenal, do not hate her for what she has done, when I tell you it is she, and not you, who justly inherits the 'Curse of Chetwynd Chase,' because, Mrs. Davenal, Barbara is your sister—your younger, twin-sister, born an hour after yourself."

Blanche jumped from her chair in a transport of astonishment.

"Regina, what do you mean to tell me? She—she my sister? the child of my parents? And I, they never know it? Regina, how can I believe this strange, incredible story?"

"Incredible as it may seem, I can prove it, and show you why your parents never knew it—why the mother never knew she gave birth to a second daughter."

"For the three months I was in attendance upon her previous to her illness, my heart used to ache to hear her lament over that fatal Curse she feared would yet fall on a child of hers. She has often fallen on her knees and prayed that God would give her sons and no daughters."

"She was so gentle and patient amid all her troubles, that I used to wish I could die to gain her her wish."

"But, when the trial came, you, her daughter was born, and, overcome by the fear that you would never be followed by a brother, and thus the fatal legacy be turned aside, Mrs. Chetwynd was seized with fearful convulsions that threatened her life."

"Horried by the sight, Mr. Chetwynd was unable to remain in the room; Mrs. Chetwynd becoming easier, the physician left her in my care a moment or so while he followed the almost fainting gentleman to render some encouraging assistance."

"He was gone probably half an hour, leaving orders with me to call him if there was the slightest change."

"Then it was, Mrs. Davenal, that Barbara was born, with only myself to officiate."

"I remembered all your poor mother's prayers; I knew you would not inherit the Curse then, and it would be a Christian mercy, I thought, to conceal this birth from everybody, and allow Mrs. Chetwynd, if she recovered, to learn, little by little, that no fatal curse fell on you. She might attribute it to whatever cause she pleased."

"So I took the babe away; I kept her, named her Barbara Lester, and, when she was older, left her at her father's door, knowing your mother's great-heartedness and kindness."

Blanche had listened in rapt attention.

"But, the severed opal and broken chain that was on her person? I have so often heard my mother wonder what it could mean. We decided, one day, that it had meant her initials, and marveled at its similarity to the legendary three D's, that denoted the 'Dishonor, Desertion and Death' of the formed Curse. Later, when a letter came, telling us her name was 'Barbara Lester,' we only thought we had been mistaken, and ceased calling her 'Della.'"

"Whether I did right or wrong, I leave you to decide. Whether my after course was right or wrong, I leave you to judge; but when I sent the child to her rightful home, I sent that half-jewel, and kept the rest for two reasons: one, that I might claim her in the future by it—the proof would be positive. The other, a vague yearning to somehow or other identify her with her family legacy. It seems that I succeeded partially."

"Then, when you saw De Laurian?" Blanche gently suggested.

"I had forgotten. Yes, when I saw him, and had told him all this story, and he, in turn, told me his, I hated him, despised him, and feared him; yet, according to his directions, sought an engagement at Chetwynd Chase, resolved, though I ostensibly went in his interest to learn, if I could, what Barbara would do when she returned, as he felt sure she would, to renew my watchful care over both the babies I once had so loved. But, when Barbara made me her confidante, and I learned the infernal blackness of her soul, I loathed her in proportion as I pitied you. How I felt when I knew she intended poisoning De Laurian, deeply though I disliked him and censured him! It was I, Mrs. Davenal, who managed to dilute the drug with which she saturated that forged letter; it was I who watched over him in his coffin in the vault, knowing death was but simulated. He doesn't know, though, that he owes his escape to me, who left unlocked the door of the vault, and with my own hands unscrewed the coffin face. I could not see murder done."

Blanche was shivering from head to foot with this weird, strange recital; and yet, inspired by the fascination, urged Regina to go on.

"There is little else to tell, Mrs. Davenal. I used to think at times I would lose my senses when I saw her pour the daily drop of liquid poison in your wine, your medicine or your soup. I used to wonder if I should not expose it all, regardless of the reckless punishment she would not have hesitated giving me. But I was a craven, a coward, and I let you go on and on down to your grave, knowing, however, that you would be rescued from it, and swearing then to save you some time, when her cat-like vigilance was removed."

"We will forget it all, dear Regina! You will be my helper now? you will save me from De Laurian, who swears I am his wife, and threatens such terrible things?"

"I will save you, Mrs. Davenal. And when you are safe in your mother's arms, you will bless me with a blessing that perhaps will sweep all this burden away."

The woman's hard eyes filled with tears, and her voice was husky and hoarse.

"Indeed, you shall never be censured—never! But where shall I go? You will go too?"

"If I may: when De Laurian goes out after dinner, and leaves you in my care, we will go. Once on the street, we can fly to wherever you wish."

"It must not be to Chetwynd Chase! I must telegraph at once to Roy, and wait at a hotel until he comes. I can readily prove my identity to Braxton and Drayton, our solicitors, and they will see that my cheque is honored for the amount we need."

Her cheeks were glowing with vivid joy, and her eyes overflowed with nervous thankfulness as she arose to take her babe, that, awakened, smiled in her face.

"It seems as if my little girl appreciated my feelings, doesn't it, Regina? If Roy and mother could but see her! my precious little one!"

Regina bent a smile of encouraging sympathy upon her.

"Have patience, Mrs. Davenal. It will only be a fortnight at the furthest before they arrive home; for, of course, they will not delay a moment. And I think the meeting will repay you for all you have undergone."

"It almost takes away my breath to think of it! Regina, if you will, I prefer lunch here in my room; and then, how shall I pass the three long hours between now and liberty?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN OLD FRIEND.

INSTEAD of waiting the three hours that intervened between her luncheon hour and the dinner-time, Regina told Blanche a better opportunity presented itself for their immediate removal.

Mr. De Laurian had left word that he was called out of the city and desired dinner delayed about an hour.

He had left no special message for Blanche's security, doubtless feeling perfect confidence in the woman he had obtained to take charge of her.

It was not yet four o'clock, when, attired in a plain black alpaca dress and shawl, a veil draped over her straw bonnet, and her baby wrapped in a Marseilles circular, Blanche walked through the front door, that Regina unlocked for her.

Once outside, on the top of the marble flight of steps, her head grew giddy with the sudden, new sense of freedom.

Never before had she appreciated the sunshine and the air as she did that warm, pleasant early August afternoon; her whole soul was filled with such an overpowering sense of thankful, triumphant joy, that she seemed treading on air.

Regina put down the dead latch, and followed Blanche's rapid footsteps.

At the first corner she glanced up, and learned, for the first time, in what street she had been staying; without a moment's hesitation she turned toward Broadway, and walked until she reached the City Hall Park.

Here she summoned a neat little coupe, and she, her babe and Regina were driven direct to the office of Braxton and Drayton.

She did not alight, but sent Regina in to tell the startling truth to either of the partners that Mrs. Royal Davenal was alive and desired only a moment's interview.

Regina evidently told the whole of the wild story, for she was closeted in the private office nearly an hour; and then, bewildered and incredulous, a white-headed old gentleman came out to the door of the coupe.

He just glanced in, and clasped his hands in stricken astonishment, as though the proof were more strange than the story.

"God bless me! Can it be possible? Is it really you, my dear child?"

A soft smile—Blanche's very own—answered him.

"I am more than happy to say that it really is I. Mr. Drayton, I am sure you congratulate me?"

And then she told him she needed money and advice; both of which he gave her, and even accompanied her to the office, and himself sent the dispatch by cable.

Most assuredly he did not advise her to go to a hotel; she must certainly go home with him. Mrs. Drayton would only be too delighted and thankful to see her. She would be safe and well cared for until her party returned.

And nothing loath, Blanche made her abode at the hospitable home of her father's staunch friend, to await the arrival of those who would greet her as from the dead.

They were very quiet, happy days to her, albeit darkened at times by scorching memories.

It really was worse to her, all those remembrances, in that a sister's hand had done the deed.

But was Barbara her sister, her mother's child? How could Mrs. Chetwynd have lived with her so many, many years, and never have recognized, by natural instinct, that she was her own?

Blanche was sorely puzzled about it. Over and over again she questioned Regina, always eliciting the same unvarying story.

Mr. Drayton, to whom Blanche confided every thing, questioned and cross-questioned the patient, stolid woman, and he was satisfied of the perfect truth of her story.

Blanche had asked him if it would be lawful for Gervaise De Laurian to hold her as his wife.

He assured her that, married as she had been to Roy Davenal after so long a time of suitable waiting, and under such unquestionable circum-

stances, she was legally Roy's wife, on whom Mr. De Laurian had not the slightest lawful or moral claim.

Moreover, it did not look well for De Laurian to have kept himself hidden so long. He must have cared nothing at all for Blanche, or he would have hastened to her at once and explained every thing. That waiting, until Blanche was married again, and then coming forward to harass her, was extremely against him.

Again, why had he not had a charge of attempted murder brought against Barbara Chetwynd? Why had he permitted her to go on in her evil way, and then revenge himself upon her in so peculiar a manner?

Mr. Drayton carefully examined the case in all its aspects, and decided upon three points:

First, to render assurance doubly sure, Blanche should secure a legal divorce from Gervaise De Laurian.

Second, since De Laurian had survived the attempt upon his life made by Mrs. Barbara Chetwynd—then Barbara Lester—she could not be made to suffer for it unless De Laurian himself should be the prosecutor.

Third, it remained at Blanche's own option to arrest her on a charge of attempted murder, if she was still at Chetwynd Chase, which he very much questioned.

The first of Mr. Drayton's suggestions was immediately attended to, so that before the family sat down to dinner Mr. Drayton and Blanche had made all necessary preliminary arrangements with an influential lawyer, who promised, under the peculiar circumstances, to obtain a decree very shortly.

The second suggestion she had nothing to do with; the last affected her most painfully.

How could she, even after all she had undergone at Barbara's hands, deliberately deliver her up to justice? Had she been a stranger, Blanche's tender mercy would have prevailed; but her sister—as she now fully believed—no, she could not ever do that.

So, her mind freed from its burdens, Blanche passed happily the days that intervened between her departure from De Laurian's house and the expected arrival of the steamer that should bring father, mother, cousin and husband.

Mr. Drayton had received no reply to his telegram, and, indeed, he had not expected it.

He knew well that the miraculous news he had sent with the summons—"The dead is risen—Blanche is alive—come at once"—would speed them on their way at the first available opportunity.

However, because he thought Blanche would be pleased, he had also telegraphed to the office of the Cunard Line in Liverpool for the list of cabin passengers that should sail by the first home-bound vessel.

Three days after had come a reply; a list of seventy names was sent, and among them those of Mr. Rexton Chetwynd, wife and servant, Roy Davenal, Rex Chetwynd, Jr., per steamer "Pacific."

Anxiously had Blanche watched the sunrises and sunsets, and now, a fortnight and three days after she had joined the Draytons' family circle, the kind-hearted old man came rushing down from his office at the unseasonable hour of twelve.

"Blanche, dear child! the Pacific's in!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE VACANT CRIB.

VERY cozily indeed looked the dining-room of Mr. De Laurian's house that evening as he entered it from the glare and racket outside in the city streets. His business completed to his satisfaction, he felt in a very delightful mood as he sauntered into the library, and from thence to the elegant dining-room.

The drawing room was empty, he had seen as he passed by, and no noises were to be heard in the house. Regina was invisible, but his *chef du cuisine* was all attention, and he sat down to the delicious dinner in solitary state.

He leaned back in his chair, carelessly toying with his silver teaspoon as he glanced over the evening papers, while the stately ebony statue poured the coffee. The cloth was laid for two, which was unusual, Blanche preferring her meals in her own room.

But to-day, so sure was he that she would have acceded to his demands, that before he had left the house he had given orders for the second plate.

The table was richly decorated with massive

plate, gleaming crystal and rose and gold-banded Sevres China, and it had been the thought of how Blanche's sweet face would look behind the coffee-urn that had sped him home that evening.

Through the orange-silk curtains the last sunset rays were falling, and yet Blanche had not come, or sent.

Where was she then, he wondered? At first, he had believed her repulse was genuine, and he had bit his lips in disappointment; but, as he thought of it, it seemed to him that she could not but reconsider her indignant denial. He grew impatient, and rung for Regina.

Receiving no answer to his imperative summons, and not daring to think anything could be the matter, he himself went up-stairs direct to the front chamber which Blanche had occupied.

To his horror and consternation it was empty! She and Regina were gone; Blanche had escaped him!

With a muttered curse on his lips he sat down to consider what to do.

There was but one explanation to the disappearance. Regina had played him false, and, together with Blanche, had sought safety and liberty.

"The old witch! the treacherous cat!"

The words hissed from his lips as he paced to and fro in the elegant room, his eyes bloodshot with anger, his lips trembling with passion under his amber mustache.

She had not returned to Chetwynd Chase he felt almost certain; in New York, who was there to whom she could fly?

He bit his lips as he thought of Braxton and Drayton.

"It is to them she has appealed, and I doubt not that by this very moment that long-delayed message is on its way! Perdition seize me for trusting to any woman's word!"

His delicate dinner was untouched that night, and the man had his orders to take it away; while De Laurian, too restless to remain seated, too angry to enjoy a cigar, wandered aimlessly through the house.

He had been at great expense in furnishing it, as he believed Blanche would approve. Everything had been done with an eye to her taste, and she had cordially admired, little knowing it was intended for a gilded cage for her.

He would be obliged to go to work very cautiously to gain the clue of her whereabouts; and as he had but lately mingled among men as he used to do, he rather dreaded any notoriety when it became known that not he alone, but Blanche Davenal also, had, as it were, arisen from their graves.

He knew, as well as old Mr. Drayton, that he could not compel Blanche to render him obedience; and he also knew that Blanche would be approved by all the world in her allegiance to Roy Davenal.

So he sat and walked all that night, laying his plans. And when morning came he had decided that "the game was not worth the candle." In other words, his love for Blanche was secondary to the desire he had felt to humble her—and baffle Barbara Chetwynd.

But, although he decided to let Roy have Blanche without any trouble on his part, he was not at all so willing that Blanche should escape so easily from his hands.

She had defied him in word and deed; she had thwarted him when all things seemed most auspicious. He had rescued her, and now he was very much disposed to hunt her down on another track, just to show her she could not, with impunity, afford to baffle him.

The immediate neighbors might have wondered where the lady, her nurse and baby had gone so suddenly; but no questions were presumed upon.

The next morning after Blanche's escape a red flag was hung out the window; the furniture sold at a "tremendous sacrifice," and No. — street, left alone in its glory.

Mr. De Laurian had driven away in a *coupe*, and that was the end of the little episode in that direction.

But, during the two weeks that Blanche was at Drayton's, awaiting her husband's and parents' coming, De Laurian was not idle.

He had taken a room at the Astor House, from which place he pursued his investigations as to Blanche's whereabouts. A private detective was acquainted with the leading facts, and requested to discover her present abode.

Not only within a week did De Laurian learn she was sojourning at Mr. Drayton's, on West Twenty-eighth street, but that a divorce was filed against him in King's office, that news had

been sent across the Atlantic of Mrs. Davenal's safety, that the "Pacific" mail steamship would bring the party, and that Regina was in constant, devoted attendance upon her young mistress.

To all this array of facts, De Laurian listened most earnestly; paid the detective and dismissed him.

So, then, all was fair weather, with Mrs. Roy Davenal. She had weathered the storm and was anchored fast in the harbor.

He smiled as he thought that, then coolly lighted a cigar and commenced smoking it, as he slowly promenaded the apartment he called his.

A week of the time since Blanche had escaped him had passed, and he had been nursing in his heart the suggestions it had given him. It mattered not that Blanche had suffered so that she was all unsinning herself in the matter; his own heart, as base as ever beat, was still revengeful, if not jealous, and the novelty of being baffled by her lent strength to his determination to reach her yet.

His thoughts were intensely occupied now by a villainous scheme he had arranged for her.

Barbara Chetwynd was out of the way; Regina should not suspect; Blanche believed herself perfectly secure; hence, it was the time to strike, if ever.

The only difficulty he experienced was, whether it would "pay" him all the trouble he would be obliged to take.

With his cigar in his mouth he walked out into Broadway to decide.

The entire family of the Draytons had driven in their barouche down to the Cunard landing to welcome the returning party, whose arrival was the occasion of so strange and ecstatic a joy.

Blanche, almost faint from her eager impatience, remained at the house, where she might meet them and be greeted by the solemn privacy of home.

Above-stairs, Regina watched the little Constanza, as she slept among her laces and ruffles—the little one of whose existence its father did not know, or grandparents dream.

Blanche had dressed the baby with infinite care, in a robe worthy its name and relationship. A wide azure silk sash was tied around it, and elegant pearl and ruby armlets looped its sleeves.

The young mother had kissed it and given it to Regina while she went down to the parlor.

Slowly as the minutes passed, it was not long before a cab rattled up to the door, and, through the hot, blinding tears that hung like mist over her strained eyes, Blanche saw first Roy leap therefrom, in impatient haste, followed by Mrs. Chetwynd and her father.

There was one second of agonized waiting, and then, with sobs of rapturous joy, too intense for words, Roy rushed into the room and clasped her in his arms.

It was a wild, fearful embrace; that grasping his loved from the grave, as it were; while the mother, in an agony of tears, so keen were her emotions, clasped a hand, and Mr. Chetwynd another.

Scarcely a word was spoken; a solemn, holy joy, too deep for utterance, bound them in silence.

Then Roy led her away to the window, and gazed in her soft, sweet eyes, as though his senses never again could be filled with the sight of her.

Later, when their tongues were unloosened, and questions could be asked and answered, the whole pitifully-sad story was told, from beginning to end.

At first Mr. and Mrs. Chetwynd could not credit the truth; but when Regina was called down from the slumbering babe, and Mr. Drayton added his belief, they, too, were constrained to accept the unwelcome truth. It was a great shock to them, and Rex, as he listened in dumb silence, grew pitiful to behold, as all his love, his confidence, was swept away at one fell blow.

"And yet I will refuse to credit all," he said, proudly. "I will see her first, and then—and then—"

His face grew stony with the anguish suggested, and he turned away to hide it.

And all this while Blanche was keeping her sweet secret; then, when Mrs. Chetwynd was earnestly questioning Regina, and Mr. Drayton engaging her father in conversation, she slipped from the room, with beating heart, to bring her little Constanza down. But Roy's watchful eyes saw her depart, and immediately he followed her, overtaking her at the foot of the stairs.

"I couldn't lose the sight of you so soon, even for a moment. Oh, my darling, my own darling wife!"

Blanche nestled in his strong, glad arms with perfect peace shining from her eyes.

"You never can know, my darling, how you love me, Roy, all the terrible anguish I have passed through. But I am more than repaid, dearest, by this hour; and when you learn what I have been holding in reserve, you will be happier yet. Roy"—and she lifted her mouth to his ear—"we've a baby daughter, alive and well, Little Constanza."

His face lighted up with a luminous pride.

"My darling Blanche! indeed I am doubly blest! Take me to her, that I may give her her father's blessing—this other little treasure snatched from the grave."

With light steps and happy hearts, that left impress on their expectant faces, they entered the room, and tiptoed across to the lace-canopied crib.

Blanche tenderly removed the linen sheet—and a piercing scream burst from her.

"Who has taken her out? Roy—where is my baby?"

Her loud, agonized scream brought Regina in breathless haste. Her countenance turned fairly green with fear as she gazed, half bewildered, at the empty crib.

"May God help you—but I solemnly believe your baby has been stolen by Gervaise De Laurian! I left her sleeping fifteen minutes ago, and no one in this house has come up-stairs."

With a fearful, heart-curdling cry, Blanche sunk insensible beside the little vacant crib.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE "STAR" OF THE BOARDS.

THE intensest confusion and excitement instantly began their reign in Mr. Drayton's mansion.

His family, who, after greeting the returned tourists at the Cunard wharf, had, with commendable discretion, prolonged their drive home in order that the meeting might be private, drove up to learn the pitiful news just as it became known. Words seemed so powerless to depict the terrible anguish that came upon that household when the fact became undisputed that Mrs. Davenal's baby had been kidnapped.

It seemed so much harder to be borne, under the peculiar circumstances that had reunited them; and when the news went forth, as it did, spreading like wildfire, sympathy and tenders of assistance came pouring in a flood upon them.

Immense rewards were offered for the return of the child, or information that would lead to its recovery.

Detectives were sent out on Gervaise De Laurian's track, for there was not the slightest doubt but that he had done, or instigated, the deed.

But success was not to be now.

Various false rumors reached them from day to day, but these all proved as such, and when a fortnight had gone, there was less clue than ever.

Through all these trials, Blanche, the long-tried, sore-afflicted mother, lay in a delirium of fever; and in the terrific struggle between life and death, they feared, if life were at last saved, her reason never could stand the shock.

But when, the fever-light fled, she opened those sad, sad eyes that should never smile again, that would over bear that brooding, eternal shadow in their brown depths, they knew she was sane, and for it thanked the inscrutable Mercy that had mixed so bitter a cup for them to drink.

Pallid, trembling, and heartbroken, she desired to be taken home to Chetwynd Chase; and, with sad good-byes, they left the hospitable house of the Draytons, and returned to their silent, long-deserted home, just as the first September days began, and there another surprise awaited them.

They found the servants had returned from a holiday Mrs. Rex had given them—Regina having prepared them for that news—and finding the mansion deserted by Barbara, had taken upon themselves to force an entrance into the servants' wing, beyond which they had not intruded.

Much as Mr. Chetwynd and his wife, and Roy, expected to find Barbara gone, they were hardly prepared for the grief and anguish that fell upon Rex when he could no longer doubt the fact of his wife's foul perfidy and guilt.

The poor fellow wandered through the halls like one demented; and what with Blanche's crushing grief, it seemed as if a Curse, indeed, had enwrapped them all in its somber folds.

Little by little all hope of recovering baby Constanza was abandoned, and the weeks changed to months on their leaden pinioned wings, while a sad, mute sorrow, seemed ever brooding over the unfortunate family.

And all this while not a word had ever come of Barbara. Columns of personals had been printed in the Herald, in all imaginable forms, but had failed to elicit a word from her.

Rex, restless and miserable, when the first pang of his grief wore off, left Chetwynd Chase on a tour of investigation, and the immediate family settled down in a quiet, retired way, seeing visitors, of course, when they came, and paying a few calls that courtesy imperatively demanded, and which their sorrows could not be allowed to meddle with.

And all these days Blanche Davenal's heart was sinking, sinking with despair; her whole nature crying out against the awful, inhuman sin that had been committed against her; while Gervaise De Laurian—

He had not remained in New York after the day of the Chetwynds' arrival; it was very warm, and, in obedience to all his impulses, he gave up his room at the Astor, and started off on an aimless pleasure tour.

Long Branch, Saratoga, Newport, were in turn patronized; then, ennued, and pleasure-surfed, he resolved to run over to England, and if he enjoyed himself, tour it all over the continent.

As with Gervaise De Laurian to will was to do, in a fortnight after—while Blanche Davenal sat moaning and weeping amid the October brightness that glowed around Chetwynd Chase—he smoked his cigar in a fashionable restaurant in London, and wondered how he should pass the first evening of his arrival. Conspicuous among the placards on the wall of the bar-room, was an announcement that Miss Ethel Wyndham, the charming actress and songstress, that night appeared in the famous role of "Muriel, the Avenger," in "Hunted Down." Her beauty was extolled in warmest terms, and her wondrous talent was too grand to express. A fledgling in her art, she had already had half London at her feet.

So De Laurian strolled through the streets to the Prince of Wales Theater, where this star of the highest magnitude condescended to shine, secured a seat in the parquette, and, as usual with gentlemen of his style, began looking around for pretty women's faces.

To the preceding farce he paid no attention, nor was it until thunders of applause shook the house, as Miss Wyndham came gracefully to the footlights, that he turned his eyes to the stage.

He saw a magnificent-looking woman, cold as an iceberg, haughty as an empress, bowing to the admiring crowd. He saw the darkly flashing eyes, the streaming raven black hair, the perfect form, all as in a dreamy maze.

Could it be possible? Was he in a trance, or were all these people around him living beings?

Was he really himself, and was that brilliant woman on the boards of the Prince of Wales Theater she whom he had betrayed, who had bade him remember she "was not yet done with him?"

His eyes were riveted eagerly on her, watching every motion as she moved about the stage. Gradually he decided that the resemblance was not so great as he at first thought. Miss Wyndham's voice, though mellow and pleasant, had not that rich redundancy of musical tone that "hers" had.

Again, and with a curse on his stupidity, he remembered "her" hair was brown, deeply, darkly brown, 'tis true, but very unlike Miss Wyndham's ebony tresses that curled in loose masses from forehead to waist, while "hers" had fallen one heavy, arrowy tress, almost to her knees.

But this Miss Wyndham was superlatively lovely; she was the "rage," and more than all, to Gervaise De Laurian, she was "new."

So, weary of the same old faces, this bright, sunny-eyed one impressed him keenly, and he inquired quite earnestly about her.

He learned she was only "Miss" on the stage; she really was a widow, with one child, who had come to London at the death of her husband, to earn her fortune by her art.

Not a word that she uttered escaped him; his admiration increased, his interest deepened; and when a shower of bouquets and wreaths fell at her feet, at the conclusion of "Hunted Down," there was one tiny offering of a tuberose and jessamine leaves, to which was attached a card bearing the name of the giver—"Gervaise De Laurian."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VENGEANCE AT LAST.

It was a delightful apartment in which Ethel Wyndham, the popular actress, was sitting, late that night.

A little distance off stood a beautiful walnut cradle, with a high canopy of azure silk under white lace; in the cozy nest slept the actress' babe; and watching it, with an expression on her face that you never would have dreamed could have saddened its ripe, rare beauty.

She had not removed her dress of amber satin in which she had performed the last act, and on her white arms and neck still gleamed the diamonds that had flashed with every turn of her body.

And her darkly-pale face, where it seemed a smile never again could come, was bent in earnest attention over the sleeping child.

"Grace," she said, in those low, pleasant tones, to a colored nurse who dozed in her chair, "Zella has not awakened since I went out! Bring me those smaller bouquets from the table, and take these boots off for me."

She leaned wearily back in the cushioned chair, watching the woman, as she deftly selected the desired articles, with that listless, calm, unambitious air so strangely at variance with the piquant brilliancy she assumed on the stage. One by one she lifted the flowers and inhaled their fragrance; then, removing from the rest the tiny spray of geranium and tuberose, glanced casually at the card attached.

As if stung by a scorpion, she sprang from her chair, dashing her lapful of blossoms right and left.

"Leave me alone, Grace, at once."

Her voice was husky, and had a far-away, unnatural sound, that made the babe in its slumbers start, as if affrighted. Then, when the servant had obeyed, she sunk down again in her chair, a vivid, glowing spot of crimson on either cheek, and a bright intensity of light in her eyes.

Several minutes she sat there, patting her foot against the plushy pink carpet, the carmine on her cheeks fading to ashen pallor.

"And has it come to this, to this? Has he crossed my path again, just when I deemed my past life so nearly forgotten amid the excitement of the present? I am doomed, doomed to measure lances with this man—and why should I hesitate? I, who never shrunk from—"

A shiver ran over her at some memory.

"I'll do it—the fates are leading me on, surely if slowly! Grace! my writing-desk!"

Calm, haughty, perfectly at ease as ever, she summoned the waiting attendant, and when her writing-desk was brought, hastily penned a message.

"If Mr. De Laurian desires the acquaintance of Miss Ethel Wyndham, he can learn her address of the manager. Miss Wyndham receives few calls, but will admit Mr. De Laurian upon one condition: that he consents to see her *en masque*."

"Take this to Manager Robbe, Grace, in the morning, early; now, assist me to undress."

She retired to her bed, but sleep would not visit her eyes; she tossed restlessly to and fro, on the downy pillows, and then, in sheer despair of courting the drowsy god, arose, threw around her a white cashmere wrapper, and, in her bare, dimpled feet, commenced a long, restless promenade.

All through the early hours of that cold, gray autumn morning, she paced the floor; at times wrapped in deepest depression of spirits, and then the sad, worried look in her eyes chased suddenly away by one of bitter wrath and intensest agitation.

"It is impossible, utterly impossible! I thought, in this new, strange life, I had effectually overcome all the evil-heartedness of those other days, but it arises like a mighty avalanche when I think upon him! I hate him with an unearthly hatred! I fled from the temptation, and the temptation has followed me! The very finger of Fate has led him to me!"

She clasped her hands tightly together; the rings cutting into the throbbing flesh.

"I will do it! his very name has fired the worst passions of my heart! I dare declare I will do it, with that innocent, guileless babe sleeping under my very eyes! Yes, the hands that kidnapped Blanche's baby—that have never touched it but in tenderest care, shall seize on Gervaise De Laurian, who has followed me on to his doom!"

And then, when the brilliant eyes gleamed with all the intensity of her soul, and that strange, rare smile, so terrible, lingered on her coral-red lips, you knew it was Barbara Chetwynd to whom Gervaise De Laurian was being

led, as she said, by the inscrutable hand of mysterious Destiny!

When the flushing morning broke, she had made her breakfast toilet; later, drove out in her brougham with Grace and little "Zella," as she called baby Constanza; and when the airing was over, and she returned to her rooms, a note awaited that, when she read, paled her cheeks for a second.

Then the proud light returned to her eyes.

"Grace, bring my crepe mask, and leave Zella in her cradle. When Mr. De Laurian rings, show him in, and retire."

She had scarcely given the directions when the summons came from the door.

She hastily adjusted the mask, threw a glowing scarlet opera cloak on her gray silk carriage costume, and, bowed a cold, graceful greeting to Gervaise De Laurian.

"I can not tell you how grateful I am to you, Mrs. Wyndham, for your condescension in allowing me to pay my respects to you in person."

She bowed gracefully in return for the implied compliment.

"I am a trifle surprised that you addressed me as 'Mrs.' How did you learn I was married?"

"Rumor said so. I beg pardon most humbly if I was mistaken. I can but envy the memory of the husband you were such a treasure to."

A little low laugh rippled behind the mask.

"All husbands are not appreciative."

"I cannot imagine yours being otherwise. He would be a very brute."

"So I thought; will you close the window, please? I really think I am chilly."

De Laurian sprang to obey the languidly-uttered request, and when he returned, drew his chair closer to her side. She did not repulse the movement, and De Laurian, emboldened, took one of her hands in his. He felt it tremble slightly; had he known why! but he did not, and attributing it to reasons flattering to his conceit, he felt a thrill of joy in his veins, as he leaned nearer her.

"I regret you desire to hide your face from me, dear lady. Why not let me look and adore, as I did last night?"

"A nearer acquaintance might disenchant you, you know."

"Impossible! the memory of your beautiful face will haunt me forever. Can I not persuade you to unmask?"

His low, eager tones were almost whispered against her ear.

"Did you not know that everybody wears masques, Mr. De Laurian? Not of crepe, like this, to be sure, or perhaps not at all visible to human eyes. How am I to know you are what you appear?"

Although her words were earnest, her manner was light and jesting; but he could not see the terrible, momentarily kindling fires in her eyes.

"For instance," she went on, "when I am on the stage, I am as a masked woman. Beneath my smiles and gayety I hide more sorrow and shame than people dream of. Mine has been a bitter cup to drink; I have been through many deep waters, and, Mr. De Laurian, you may not believe me, but I am thirsting for revenge! But what high tragedy am I indulging in? Come, see my baby."

She arose from her chair and went across the floor to the cradle, where the child lay, awake and smiling.

De Laurian gave a casual look preparatory to the flattery he supposed expected from him.

Then he started; stared at the child, and turned abruptly back toward—

There she stood, in all her awful beauty—Barbara Chetwynd!

Transfixed with the suddenness of the shock, he could only stare wildly, and essay to gasp her name.

But the thunder of her voice rolled in his ears.

"We meet again, face to face, for the last time, Gervaise De Laurian! Look at me, for I am she! look at the child, for it is Blanche Davenal's!"

For a moment only he recoiled in horror; then, his lips curling with contempt, would have left the room without another word.

But Barbara sprang before him with a high, shrill laugh.

"No, Gervaise De Laurian, I have sworn by all the powers of Hades that you do not escape me again! Once, twice you baffled me, and the memory rankles still. Then, when I had entered the house where that sleeping baby lay, while all was confusion and glad excitement below, and stole it to punish its mother, I vainly thought to expiate my sins by goodness and kindness to it. But when you unsought, came to my very door, all the devils in my soul clamored hungrily for vengeance. I will have my

vengeance, Gervaise De Laurian, and you shall know what it is to be hunted down by the woman you have disgraced, deserted!"

Her majestic form seemed to tower above him. He saw her eyes, flashing like a madwoman's. He heard the quick, low breathing; and then some bright object flashed from her bosom; a noise, a deathly horror—

And Gervaise De Laurian was launched on the Sea of Eternity!

He lay as he fell, graceful even in the rigidity of death, while Barbara looked grimly down at her work, reckless of the crowd surging up the stairs who had heard the shot; reckless of the terrified wailing of the baby in the cradle.

The door burst open; the excited crowd rushed in, and then Barbara started in affright.

She cast one look at the foremost figure, and with a cry of infinite agony, spoke his name.

"No! no! not Rex Chetwynd!"

Then, with the speed of a lightning flash, she snatched the tiny revolver, placed it against her temple, drew the trigger, and fell a corpse across Gervaise De Laurian's body!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MYSTERY NO MORE.

STRANGE as they seemed, Barbara Chetwynd's last words were true; it was indeed her husband, Rex Chetwynd, who had gone on his loving, hopeful task of finding, somewhere in the wide, wide world, the wife of his bosom whom he so worshiped, and, though against whom such awful calumnies had been hurled, he could not believe so vile, so fiendish a creature.

From Chetwynd Chase he had wandered aimlessly westward; while in Chicago, he had picked up a London paper, and casually read the advertisement of the "charming Miss Wyndham."

With peculiar force, the similarity of a part of the name had occurred to him. His one object in life was to learn from Barbara's own lips her innocence or guilt, by which he would abide; this might be she; at any rate she was as likely to be in England as America, and he might as well follow this imaginary thread in the dreadful tangle as any.

So he sailed for Liverpool, and arrived in London several hours previous to the tragedy. He had at once gone to the manager of the Prince of Wales theater, and learned the address of Mrs. Ethel Wyndham, and was wondering as he mingled with the crowd that was constantly surging past her windows, how he would obtain an interview, in consequence of her not appearing for a fortnight on the boards.

At the very moment he passed her door, with slow steps and scanning eyes, had come the pistol-shot, and the heavy fall, and the infant's shrill scream that alarmed the passers-by.

Foremost with the crowd, and side by side with a policeman, he entered the room, in time to see, but powerless to prevent, the terrible closing of the tragedy.

It needed but a glance to recognize Gervaise De Laurian, and there came to him the awful suspicion that Barbara had added to her long catalogue of sins the heinous one of disloyalty to him.

His heart was bursting with anguish as he knelt beside the ill-starred pair; little did he dream how fearfully their vow had been kept, although made in mockery by the one, and earnest by the other that "Death alone should part them!"

The crowd stood back a moment, awed by his stony sorrow, as he softly smoothed her bright hair, and closed her heavily-lashed eyelids. Then, when the officer had kindly suggested him to retire, he mechanically walked to the cradle, where little Constanza lay, in terrified silence, her brown eyes raised in piteous, wistful entreaty, her tiny lips quivering with dread.

A fresh pang of anguish thrilled his very heart-strings. Barbara's child—and perhaps De—

No, he would not harbor the thought. She was dead now, as well past any more sinning as repenting.

As he stood there, looking at the baby and hardly seeing it, came the passing thought of how different the home at Chetwynd Chase would be if this were Blanche's—and the thought suddenly suffocated him. Blanche's child! Might it not be Blanche's of a verity? De Laurian was supposed to have abducted it—and there lay De Laurian, dead.

In his feverish excitement, he called for the nurse of the child, and communicated his suspicions to the officer. Grace said the child was Mrs. Wyndham's as far as she knew, and that she never had heard it called by any other name than Zella.

The officer inquired if there was any package of clothes anywhere that the actress took special care of?

Grace said there was; a bundle locked up in a drawer that she never was allowed to open. She had seen Mrs. Wyndham often have it, but beyond the glimpse of something blue she did not know what it contained.

The drawer was broken open, under the officer's directions, and the package given to Mr. Chetwynd.

"Before I open it, as a proof that I am sure that child is my cousin's, I will describe its contents as advertised. There will be a blue silk sash, fringed at the ends; an embroidered suit of underclothing; a lace ruffled robe; a pair of armlets, and a blanket, all marked C. C. D., the initials for Constanza Chetwynd Davenal."

The package was opened, and Mr. Chetwynd's list found complete, while, as though the "finger of Fate" had been as determined about this affair as Barbara had averred it was in another, there was a letter unsigned, undated, but unmistakably written in Barbara's hand. "Constanza's clothes, August 31st."

It was the very day of the event that had well nigh killed Blanche, the day the "Pacific" arrived; the day Blanche had received her decree of divorce from Gervaise De Laurian.

Further proofs were not deemed necessary, and in a very few days the little one was given to Rex Chetwynd to take to his mother.

He secured the services of the colored woman, Grace, and took immediate passage home, having seen the last rites performed over the remains of the beautiful woman, who, with her headlong passions, her fiery temper, had inherited, to a terrible fatality, first, "dishonor," then desertion, and finally death, the Curse of Chetwynd Chase.

The first gathering shades of Christmas Eve were falling over Chetwynd Chase; the lights were gleaming from window and hall as Rex Chetwynd drove up the leafless avenue to the home he was going to bless, but from which the light and brightness was forever fled for him.

Rapidly the carriage containing its precious freight drove up, and reined in at the front entrance.

Bidding Grace remain where she was until he beckoned, Rex sprang out and went up the steps.

The doors were not fastened at that early hour, and without any trouble he made his way to the dining-room, where he supposed the family were at dinner.

He was not mistaken; they were at dinner, and he was in their midst before any one saw him.

The greetings were quiet, but full of love and tenderness; and when each in turn had been embraced, he turned to Blanche.

"I have brought you a Christmas present; you will accept it?"

A wan little smile hovered for a moment on her lips. "Most assuredly, Rex; yet I would ask no better present than to know you were happy once more."

A shade crossed his face as he answered very gently:

"I have but one request to make, for my Christmas gift. I will tell you once for all, that Barbara is dead, and Gervaise De Laurian also sleeps his last sleep. I saw them both. When, or where, never shall cross my lips, God willing. All I ask is, never mention it to me again."

A solemn awe-struck silence fell on them; and God only knows the feeling of their hearts as they sat there.

"But let us cast aside gloomy thoughts. The past can not be recalled; and I am going to give Blanche her Christmas present."

He went to the window and beckoned to Grace, whom he met at the door, and divested of her burden.

With rapid, irregular steps he crossed the room to Blanche, who, with sudden, excited manner, had risen from her chair.

"Oh, Rex!—Rex!—"

Her eager question, prompted by some wonderful instinct, died on her lips as Rex crossed the room to her, and laid the smiling, beautiful baby in her arms—her own, her very own!

We leave them to their rapturous ecstasy on that never-to-be-forgotten Christmas Eve, when by the same hand that led Blanche through such raging waters, she was brought to a great glorious light that never was dimmed again by the shadow even of "The Curse of Chetwynd Chase."

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